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THE ROMANCES OF

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

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THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

Being Adventures of

THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE

Volume Two

The D'Artagnan Romances v. 12

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CHAPTER XXXVI.

CHAILLOT.

ALTHOUGH they had not been summoned, Manicamp and Malicorne had followed the king and D'Artagnan. They were both exceedingly intelligent men, except that Malicorne was often too precipitate, owing to his ambition, while Manicamp was frequently too tardy, owing to his indolence. On this occasion, however, they seized the proper moment. Five horses were waiting in readiness. Two were taken by the king and D'Artagnan, two others by Manicamp and Malicorne, while a groom belonging to the stables mounted the fifth. The whole cavalcade set off at a gallop. D'Artagnan had been very careful in his selection of the horses; they were the very horses for distressed lovers, — horses which not simply ran, but flew.

Within ten minutes after their departure, the cavalcade, amid a cloud of dust, arrived at Chaillot. The king literally threw himself off his horse; but notwithstanding his rapidity of movement, he found D'Artagnan already at his horse's bridle. With a sign of acknowledgment to the musketeer, he threw the bridle to the groom, then darted into the vestibule, violently pushed open the door, and entered the reception-room. Manicamp, Malicorne, and the groom remained outside, D'Artagnan alone following his master. When he entered the reception-room, the first object which met his gaze was Louise herself, not on her knees, but lying at the foot of a large stone crucifix.

The young girl was stretched upon the damp flag-stones, scarcely visible in the gloom of the apartment, which was lighted only by means of a narrow window, protected by bars, and completely shaded by climbing plants. She was alone, inanimate, cold as the stone upon which her body lay. When the king saw her in this state he thought she was dead, and uttered a terrible cry, which made D'Artagnan hurry into the room. The king had already passed an arm round her body, and D'Artagnan assisted him in raising the poor girl, of whom the torpor of death seemed already to have taken possession. The king then took her wholly into his arms, and tried to warm with his kisses her icy hands and temples.

D'Artagnan seized the call-bell, and rang with all his might. The Carmelite Sisters immediately hastened at the summons, and uttered loud exclamations of alarm and indignation at the sight of the two men holding a woman in their arms. The superior also hurried in; but far more a creature of the world than any of the female members of the court, notwithstanding her austerity, she recognized the king at the first glance, by the respect which those present exhibited for him, as well as by the imperious and authoritative way in which he had thrown the whole establishment into confusion. As soon as she saw the king, she retired to her own apartments, in order to avoid compromising her dignity. But by the nuns she sent various cordials, — Queen of Hungary water, balm, etc., — and ordered that all the doors should be immediately closed, — a command which was just in time, for the king's distress was fast becoming of a most clamorous and despairing character. He had almost decided to send for his own physician, when La Vallière exhibited signs of returning animation. The first object which met her gaze, as she opened her eyes, was the king at her feet.

In all probability she did not recognize him, for she uttered a deep sigh of anguish and distress. Louis fixed his eyes devouringly upon her face; and when in the course of a few moments her wandering looks returned to the king, she recognized him and endeavored to tear herself from his embrace.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured, "is not the sacrifice yet made?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the king; "and it shall not be made, I swear."

Notwithstanding her weakness and utter despair, she rose from the ground, saying, "It must be made, however, — it must be; so do not stay me in my purpose!"

"I leave you to sacrifice yourself! — I! Never, never!" exclaimed the king.

"Well," murmured D'Artagnan, "I may as well go now. As soon as they begin to speak, we will spare them our ears;" and he left the room, leaving the two lovers alone.

"Sire," continued La Vallière, "not another word, I implore you! Do not destroy the only future I can hope for, — my salvation; do not destroy the glory and brightness of your own future for a mere caprice."

"A caprice!" cried the king.

"Oh, Sire, it is now only that I can clearly see into your heart!"

"You, Louise? What do you mean?"

"An inexplicable and unreasonable impulse may momentarily appear to offer a sufficient excuse for your conduct; but there are duties imposed upon you which are incompatible with your regard for a poor girl such as I am. So forget me!"

"I forget you!"

"You have already done so."

"Rather would I die!"

"Sire, you cannot love one whose peace of mind you hold so lightly, and whom you so cruelly abandoned last night to the bitterness of death."

"What can you mean? Explain yourself, Louise!"

"What did you ask me yesterday morning? To love you. What did you promise me in return? Never to let midnight pass without offering me an opportunity of reconciliation whenever your anger might be aroused against me."

"Oh, forgive me, Louise, forgive me! I was almost mad from jealousy."

"Jealousy is an unworthy sentiment, Sire, which springs up like tares that have been cut down. You may become jealous again, and will end by killing me. Be merciful, then, and leave me now to die!"

"Another word, Mademoiselle, in that strain, and you will see me expire at your feet!"

"No, no, Sire, I am better acquainted with my own demerits. Believe me, and do not sacrifice yourself for an unhappy girl whom all despise."

"Oh, name those whom you accuse, name them!"

"I have no complaints, Sire, to prefer against any one, no one but myself to accuse. Farewell, Sire! You are compromising yourself in speaking to me in such a manner."

"Oh, be careful, Louise, in what you say; for you are reducing me to the very depths of despair."

"Oh, Sire, Sire, leave me to the protection of Heaven, I implore you!"

"Heaven itself shall not tear you from me."

"Save me, then," cried the poor girl, "from those determined and pitiless enemies who are thirsting to destroy my very life and honor too. If you have courage enough to love me, show at least that you have power enough to

defend me. But, no; she whom you say you love, others insult and mock, and drive away in disgrace;" and the gentle-hearted girl, forced by her own bitter distress to accuse others, wrung her hands in an uncontrollable agony of tears.

"You have been driven away!" exclaimed the king. "This is the second time I have heard that said."

"I have been driven away with shame and ignominy, Sire. You see, then, that I have no other protector but Heaven, no consolation but prayer, and that this cloister is my only refuge."

"My palace, my whole court, shall be yours. Oh, fear nothing further now, Louise! Those who yesterday drove you away, be they men or women, shall to-morrow tremble before you. To-morrow, do I say? Nay, this very day have I already shown my displeasure, — have I already threatened. It is in my power, even now, to hurl the thunderbolt which I have hitherto withheld. Louise, Louise, you shall be cruelly avenged; tears of blood shall repay your tears. Give me only the names of your enemies."

"Never, never!"

"How can I show my anger, then?"

"Sire, those upon whom your anger would have to fall would force you to withhold your hand."

"Oh, you do not know me!" cried the king, exasperated. "Rather than draw back, I would sacrifice my kingdom and curse my family. Yes, I would even destroy this arm, if it were so cowardly as not to annihilate all those who had ventured to make themselves the enemies of the gentlest and best of creatures;" and as he said these words, Louis struck his fist violently against the oaken wainscoting, which returned an ominous sound.

La Vallière was alarmed, for the wrath of this all-powerful young man had something imposing and threatening in it, and, like that of the tempest, might be mortal in its effects. She, who thought that her own sufferings could not be surpassed, was overwhelmed by a suffering which revealed itself by menace and by violence. "Sire," she said, "for the last time I implore you to leave me! Already do I feel strengthened by the calm seclusion of this asylum; and I feel more calm under the protection of Heaven, for all the petty human meannesses of this world are forgotten beneath the Divine protection. Once more, then, Sire, I implore you to leave me to my God!"

"Confess, rather," cried Louis, "that you have never loved me; admit that my humility and my repentance are flattering to your pride, but that my distress affects you not; admit that the king of France is no longer regarded as a lover whose tenderness of devotion is capable of working out your happiness, but that he is a despot whose caprice has utterly destroyed in your heart the very last fibre of tender feeling. Do not say that you are seeking Heaven; say rather that you are fleeing from the king. No, Heaven is not accessory to relentless vows: it receives penitence and remorse; it pardons, it is indulgent to love."

Louise's heart was wrung within her, as she listened to his passionate utterance, which made the fever of passion course through every vein in her body. "But did you not hear me say that I have been driven away, scorned, despised?"

"I will make you the most respected, the most adored, and the most envied of my whole court."

"Prove to me that you have not ceased to love me."

"In what way?"

"By leaving me."

"I will prove it to you by never leaving you again."

"But do you imagine, Sire, that I shall allow that, — do you imagine that I will let you come to an open rupture with every member of your family, — do you imagine that for my sake I will let you abandon mother, wife, and sister?"

"Ah, you have named them, then, at last; it is they, then, who have wrought this grievous injury! By the Heaven above us, I will punish them."

"That is the reason why the future terrifies me, why I refuse everything, why I do not wish you to avenge me. Tears enough have already been shed, sufficient sorrow and affliction have already been occasioned. Oh, never will I be the cause of sorrow or affliction or distress to any one, whoever it may be; for I have mourned and suffered and wept too much myself!"

"And do you count my sufferings, my distress, and my tears as nothing?"

"In Heaven's name, Sire, do not speak to me in that manner! I need all my courage to enable me to accomplish the sacrifice."

"Louise, Louise, I implore you! Command, dictate, avenge yourself, or pardon; but do not abandon me!"

"Alas, Sire, we must part!"

"You do not love me, then!"

"Heaven knows I do!"

"It is false, Louise; it is false."

"Oh, Sire, if I did not love you, I should let you do what you please, — I should let you revenge me, in return for the insult which has been inflicted on me, — I should accept the sweet triumph to my pride which you propose; and yet you cannot deny that I reject even the sweet compensation which your affection affords, — that affection

which for me is life itself, for I wished to die when I thought that you loved me no longer."

"Yes, yes, I now know, I now perceive it; you are the holiest, the most adorable of women. There is no one so worthy as yourself, not alone of my own respect and devotion, but also of the respect and devotion of all who surround me; and therefore shall no one be loved like yourself, Louise, — no one shall ever possess the influence over me that you wield. Yes, I swear to you, I would dash society to pieces like a glass, if it should hinder me. You wish me to be calm, to forgive; be it so, I will calm myself. You wish to reign by gentleness and clemency; I will be clement and gentle. Dictate for me the conduct you wish me to adopt, and I will obey blindly."

"In Heaven's name, no, Sire! What am I, a poor girl, to dictate a syllable to so great a monarch as yourself?"

"You are my life and my soul! Is it not the soul that rules the body?"

"You love me, then, Sire?"

"On my knees, with my hands upraised to you, with all the strength and power which Heaven has given me. I love you so deeply that I would happily lay down my life for you at your merest wish."

"Oh, Sire, now that I know you love me, I have nothing more to wish for in the whole world! Give me your hand, Sire; and then farewell! I have enjoyed in this life all the happiness which was my due."

"Oh, no! Say only that your life is beginning. Your happiness is not a happiness of yesterday; it is of to-day, of to-morrow, ever-enduring. The future is yours; everything which is mine is yours too. Away with these ideas of separation! Away with these gloomy, despairing thoughts! You will live for me, as I will live for Louise!" and he threw himself at her feet, em-

bracing her knees with the wildest transports of joy and gratitude.

"Oh, Sire, Sire! all that is but a wild dream."

"Why a wild dream?"

"Because I cannot return to the court. Exiled, how can I see you again? Would it not be far better to bury myself in a cloister, with the rich consolation that your affection gives me, with the latest pulses of your heart beating for me, and your latest confession of love still ringing in my ears?"

"Exiled, — you!" exclaimed Louis XIV.; "and who exiles when I recall?"

"Oh, Sire, something which rules superior to kings even, — the world and public opinion. Reflect for a moment! You cannot love a woman who has been ignominiously driven away, — one whom your mother has stained with suspicion, one whom your sister has disgraced with punishment; such a woman, indeed, would be unworthy of you."

"Unworthy! — one who belongs to me?"

"Yes, Sire, precisely on that account; from the very moment when she belongs to you, your mistress is unworthy."

"You are right, Louise; every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours. Very well, you shall not be exiled."

"Ah, you have not heard Madame; that is very clear."

"I will appeal from her to my mother."

"Again, Sire, you have not seen your mother."

"She, also! Poor Louise! every one's hand, then, is against you."

"Yes, yes, poor Louise, who was already bending beneath the fury of the storm, when you arrived and crushed her beneath the weight of your displeasure."

"Oh, forgive me!"

"You will not, I know, be able to make either of them yield. Believe me, the evil cannot be repaired, for I will not allow you to use violence or to exercise your authority."

"Very well, Louise, to prove to you how fondly I love you, I will do one thing, — I will see Madame; I will make her revoke her sentence, I will compel her to do so."

"Compel? Oh, no, no!"

"True; you are right. I will bend her."

Louise shook her head.

"I will entreat her, if it be necessary," said Louis. "Will you believe in my affection after that?"

Louise drew herself up. "Oh, never, never shall you humiliate yourself on my account; rather, a thousand times, would I die!"

Louis reflected; his features assumed a dark expression. "I will love as much as you have loved," he said; "I will suffer as keenly as you have suffered; this shall be my expiation in your eyes. Come, Mademoiselle, let us put aside these paltry considerations; let us show ourselves as great as our sufferings, as strong as our affection for each other;" and as he said this, he took her in his arms, and encircled her waist with both his hands, saying, "My own love! my life! follow me."

She made a final effort, in which she concentrated no longer all her firmness of will, for that had long since been overcome, but all her physical strength. "No!" she replied weakly, "no, no! I should die of shame."

"No! you shall return like a queen. No one knows that you have left, — except, indeed, D'Artagnan."

"He has betrayed me, then?"

"In what way?"

"He promised me faithfully —"

"I promised not to say anything to the king," said D'Artagnan, showing his keen face through the half-open door, "and I kept my word. I was speaking to M. de Saint-Aignan; and it was not my fault if the king overheard me, was it, Sire?"

"It is quite true," said the king; "forgive him."

La Vallière smiled, and held out her small white hand to the musketeer.

"M. d'Artagnan," said the king, delighted, "be good enough to see if you can find a carriage for Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Sire," replied the captain, "the carriage is waiting."

"Well, there is a model servant!" exclaimed the king.

"You have taken a long time to find it out," muttered D'Artagnan, notwithstanding he was flattered by the praise bestowed upon him.

La Vallière was overcome; after a little further hesitation she allowed herself to be led away, half fainting, by her royal lover. But as she was on the point of leaving the room, she tore herself from the king's grasp, and returned to the stone crucifix, which she kissed, saying, "O Heaven! it was thou who drewest me hither, thou who hast rejected me; but thy grace is infinite. Whenever I shall again return, forget that I have ever separated myself from thee; for when I return, it will be — never to leave thee again."

The king could not restrain his emotion, and D'Artagnan, even, wiped away a tear. Louis bore the young girl away, lifted her into the carriage, and directed D'Artagnan to seat himself beside her; while he, mounting his horse, spurred violently towards the Palais-Royal, where immediately on his arrival he sent to request an audience of Madame.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MADAME.

From the manner in which the king had dismissed the ambassadors, even the least clear-sighted persons had imagined war would ensue. The ambassadors themselves, but slightly acquainted with the king's domestic affairs, had interpreted as directed against themselves the celebrated sentence: "If I be not master of myself, I at least will be so of those who do me outrage." Happily for the destinies of France and Holland, Colbert had followed them out of the king's presence for the purpose of explaining matters to them; but the two queens and Madame, who were perfectly aware of every circumstance that had taken place in their own households, having heard the remark so full of dark meaning, retired to their own apartments in no little fear and chagrin. Madame especially felt that the royal anger might fall upon her; and as she was brave and exceedingly proud, instead of seeking support from the queen-mother, she had returned to her own apartments, if not without some uneasiness, at least without any intention of avoiding the encounter.

Anne of Austria from time to time, at frequent intervals, sent messengers to learn if the king had returned. The silence which the whole palace preserved upon the matter and upon Louise's disappearance was indicative of a long train of misfortunes to all those who knew the haughty and irritable humor of the king. But Madame, remaining firm in spite of all the flying rumors, shut her-

self up in her apartments, called Montalais to her, and with a voice as calm as she could possibly command, desired her to relate all she knew about the event itself. Just as the eloquent Montalais was concluding with all kinds of oratorical precautions, and was recommending that Madame should show forbearance towards La Vallière, M. Malicorne made his appearance to beg an audience of Madame, on behalf of his Majesty. Montalais's worthy friend bore upon his countenance all the signs of the very liveliest emotion. It was impossible to be mistaken; the interview which the king requested would be one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the hearts of kings and of men.

Madame was disturbed by her brother-in-law's arrival; she did not expect it so soon, nor had she, indeed, expected any direct step on Louis's part. Besides, all women, who wage war so successfully by indirect means, are invariably neither very skilful nor very strong when it becomes a question of accepting a pitched battle. Madame, however, was not one who ever drew back, — she had the very opposite defect or qualification, in whichever light it may be considered; she took an exaggerated view of what constituted real courage; and therefore the king's message, of which Malicorne had been the bearer, produced the effect upon her of the trumpet proclaiming the beginning of hostilities. She therefore boldly accepted the gage of battle. Five minutes afterwards the king ascended the staircase. His color was heightened from having ridden hard. His dusty and disordered clothes formed a singular contrast with the fresh and perfectly arranged toilet of Madame, who however turned pale under her rouge as he entered. Louis lost no time in approaching the object of his visit; he sat down, and Montalais disappeared. Madame seated herself opposite the king.

"My dear sister," said the king, "you are aware that Mademoiselle de la Vallière fled from her own room this morning, and that she has retired to a cloister, overwhelmed by grief and despair." As he pronounced these words, the king's voice was singularly moved.

"Your Majesty is the first to inform me of it," replied Madame.

"I should have thought that you might have learned it this morning, during the reception of the ambassadors," said the king.

"From your emotion, Sire, I imagined that something extraordinary had happened, but did not know what it was."

The king, with his usual frankness, went straight to the point. "My sister," said he, "why have you sent Mademoiselle de la Vallière away?"

"Because I had reason to be dissatisfied with her service," replied Madame, dryly.

The king became crimson, and his eyes kindled with a fire which it required all Madame's courage to endure. He mastered his anger, however, and continued: "A stronger reason than that is surely requisite, my sister, for one so good and kind as you are, to turn away and dishonor, not only the young girl herself, but every member of her family as well. You know that the whole city has its eyes fixed upon the conduct of the female portion of the court. To dismiss a maid of honor is to attribute a crime to her — at the very least, a fault. Of what crime, what fault, has Mademoiselle de la Vallière been guilty?"

"Since you constitute yourself the protector of Mademoiselle de la Vallière," replied Madame, coldly, "I will give you those explanations which I should have a perfect right to withhold from every one."

"Even from the king!" exclaimed Louis, as with a sudden gesture he replaced his hat on his head.

"You have called me your sister," said Madame, "and I am in my own apartments."

"It matters not," said the youthful monarch, ashamed at having been hurried away by his anger; "neither you, Madame, nor any one else in this kingdom, can assert a right to withhold an explanation in my presence."

"Since that is the way you regard it," said Madame, with repressed anger, "all that remains for me to do is to bow to your Majesty, and to be silent."

"No; let there be no equivocation between us."

"The protection with which you surround Mademoiselle de la Vallière does not impose any respect."

"No equivocation, I repeat. You are perfectly aware that as head of the nobility of France I am accountable to all for the honor of every family; you dismiss Mademoiselle de la Vallière, or whoever else it may be —" Madame shrugged her shoulders. "Or whoever else it may be, I repeat," continued the king; "and as in acting in that manner you cast a dishonorable reflection upon that person, I ask you for an explanation, in order that I may confirm or annul the sentence."

"Annul my sentence!" exclaimed Madame, haughtily. "What! when I have discharged one of my attendants, do you order me to take her back again?"

The king remained silent.

"This would cease to be an excess of power merely, Sire; it would be indecorous and unseemly."

"Madame!"

"As a woman, I should revolt against an abuse so insulting to all propriety; I should no longer be able to regard myself as a princess of your blood, a daughter of a monarch; I should be the meanest of creatures, more humble than the servant I had sent away."

The king rose from his seat with anger. "It cannot

be a heart," he cried, "which you have beating in your bosom; if you act in such a way with me, I may have reason to act with similar severity."

It sometimes happens that in a battle a chance ball may reach its mark. The observation which the king had made without any particular intention struck Madame home, and staggered her for a moment; some day or other she might indeed have reason to dread reprisals. "At all events, Sire," she said, "explain what you require."

"I ask, Madame, what has Mademoiselle de la Vallière done to you?"

"She is the most cunning fomenter of intrigues that I know; she was the occasion of two personal friends engaging in mortal combat, and has made people talk of her in such shameless terms that the whole court is indignant at the mere sound of her name."

"She! she!" cried the king.

"Under her soft and hypocritical manner," continued Madame, "she hides a disposition full of foul and dark deceit."

"She!"

"You may possibly be deceived, Sire, but I know her right well. She is capable of creating dissension between the most affectionate relatives and the most intimate friends. You see that she has already sown discord between us two."

"I do assure you —" said the king.

"Sire, look well into the case as it stood! We were living on the most friendly understanding, and by the artfulness of her tales and complaints she has set your Majesty against me."

"I swear to you," said the king, "that on no occasion has a bitter word ever passed her lips; I swear that even

in my wild bursts of passion she would never allow me to menace any one; and I swear, too, that you do not possess a more devoted and respectful friend."

"Friend!" said Madame, with an expression of supreme disdain.

"Take care, Madame!" said the king; "you forget that you now understand me, and that from this moment everything is equalized. Mademoiselle de la Vallière will be whatever I may choose her to become; and to-morrow, if I so determine, she shall be qualified to sit upon a throne."

"She will not have been born to a throne, at least; and whatever you may do can affect the future alone, but cannot affect the past."

"Madame, towards you I have shown every kind consideration and every eager attention; do not remind me that I am master here."

"That is the second time, Sire, that you have made that remark, and I have already had the honor of informing you that I am ready to submit."

"In that case, then, will you confer upon me the favor of receiving Mademoiselle de la Vallière back again?"

"For what purpose, Sire, since you have a throne to bestow upon her? I am too insignificant to protect so exalted a personage."

"A truce to this bitter and disdainful spirit! Grant me her forgiveness."

"Never!"

"You drive me, then, to open warfare in my own family?"

"I, too, have my own family, where I can find refuge."

"Do you mean that as a threat, and could you forget yourself so far? Do you believe that if you push the affront to that extent, your family would sustain you?"

"I hope, Sire, that you will not force me to take any step which would be unworthy of my rank."

"I hoped that you would remember our friendship, and that you would treat me as a brother."

Madame paused for a moment. "I do not disown you for a brother," she said, "in refusing your Majesty an injustice."

"An injustice!"

"Oh, Sire, if I informed others of La Vallière's conduct, — if the queen knew —"

"Come, come, Henrietta, let your heart speak. Remember that you have loved me; remember, too, that human hearts should be as merciful as the heart of our sovereign Master. Do not be inflexible with others; forgive La Vallière!"

"I cannot; she has offended me."

"But for my sake?"

"Sire, for your sake I would do anything in the world except that."

"You will drive me to despair, — you compel me to turn to the last resource of weak people; you then incite me to wrath and discord?"

"I advise you to be reasonable."

"Reasonable! I can be so no longer."

"Nay, Sire, I pray you —"

"For pity's sake, my sister; it is the first time I have entreated any one, and I have no hope in any one but in you."

"Oh, Sire, you are weeping!"

"From rage, from humiliation! — that I, the king, should have been obliged to descend to entreaty! I shall hate this moment during my whole life. My sister, you have made me suffer in one moment more pain than I could have anticipated in the greatest extremity in life;"

and the king rose and gave free vent to his tears, which in fact were tears of anger and of shame.

Madame was not touched exactly, — for the best women, when their pride is hurt, are without pity, — but she was afraid that the tears the king was shedding might possibly carry away every soft and tender feeling in his heart. "Give what commands you please, Sire," she said; "and since you prefer my humiliation to your own, — although mine is public, and yours has been witnessed but by myself alone, — speak! I will obey your Majesty."

"No, no, Henrietta!" exclaimed Louis, transported with gratitude; "you will have yielded to a brother's wishes."

"I no longer have any brother, since I obey."

"Will you accept my kingdom in grateful acknowledgment?"

"How passionately you love, Sire, when you do love!"

He did not answer. He had seized upon Madame's hand and covered it with kisses. "And so you will receive this poor girl back again, and will forgive her; you will find how gentle and pure-hearted she is."

"I will maintain her in my household."

"No, you will give her your friendship, my dear sister."

"I have never liked her."

"Well, for my sake you will treat her kindly, will you not, Henrietta?"

"I will treat her as your mistress."

The king rose suddenly to his feet. By this word which had so fatally escaped her lips, Madame had destroyed all the merit of her sacrifice. The king felt freed from all obligation. Exasperated beyond measure, and bitterly offended, he replied, "I thank you, Madame; I shall never forget the service you have rendered me;"

and saluting her with an affectation of ceremony, he took his leave of her. As he passed before a glass, he saw that his eyes were red, and he stamped with anger. But it was too late; for Malicorne and D'Artagnan, who were standing at the door, had seen his eyes.

"The king has been crying," thought Malicorne.

D'Artagnan approached the king with a respectful air, and said in a low tone, "Sire, it would be better to return to your own apartments by the small staircase."

"Why?"

"Because the dust of the road has left its traces on your face," said D'Artagnan. "*Mordioux!*" he thought, "when the king has been giving way like a child, let those look to it who may bring sorrow to her for whom the king has wept."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MADEMOISELLE DE LA VALLIÈRE'S POCKET-HANDKERCHIEF.

MADAME was not bad-hearted; she was only hasty and impetuous. The king was not imprudent; he was only in love. Hardly had they entered into this sort of compact, which terminated in La Vallière's recall, when both sought to make as much as they could by their bargain. The king wished to see La Vallière every moment in the day; while Madame, who was sensible of the king's annoyance ever since he had so entreated her, would not abandon La Vallière without a contest. She planted every conceivable difficulty in the king's path. He was in fact obliged, in order to get a glimpse of La Vallière, to be exceedingly devoted in his attentions to his sister-in-law; and this, indeed, was Madame's plan of policy. As she had chosen some one to second her efforts, and as this person was Montalais, the king found himself completely hemmed in every time he paid Madame a visit; he was surrounded, and was never left a moment alone.

Madame displayed in her conversation a charm of manner and brilliancy of wit which eclipsed everything. Montalais followed her example, and soon rendered herself quite insupportable to the king, — which was, in fact, the very thing she had expected. She then set Malicorne at the king, who found the means of informing his Majesty that there was a young person belonging to the court

who was exceedingly miserable ; and on the king's inquiring who this person was, Malicorne replied that it was Mademoiselle de Montalais. To this the king declared that it was perfectly just that a person should be unhappy when she rendered others so. Whereupon Malicorne explained how matters stood ; for he had received his directions from Montalais.

The king began to open his eyes. He remarked that as soon as he made his appearance, Madame made hers too ; that she remained in the corridors until after he had left ; that she accompanied him to the outermost door, fearing that he might speak in the antechambers to one of her maids of honor. One evening she went further still. The king was seated, surrounded by the ladies who were present, and held in his hand, concealed by his lace ruffle, a small note which he wished to slip into La Vallière's hand. Madame guessed both his intention and the letter too. It was very difficult to prevent the king from going wherever he pleased, and yet it was necessary to prevent his going near La Vallière to greet her, as by so doing he could let the note fall into her lap behind her fan or into her pocket-handkerchief. The king, who was also on the watch, suspected that a snare was being laid for him. He rose and pushed his chair, without affectation, near Mademoiselle de Châtillon, with whom he began to talk in a light tone. They were amusing themselves in making rhymes ; from Mademoiselle de Châtillon he went to Montalais, and then to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. And thus, by this skilful manœuvre, he found himself seated in front of La Vallière, whom he completely concealed. Madame pretended to be greatly occupied ; she was altering a group of flowers that she was working in tapestry. The king showed the corner of his letter to La Vallière, and the latter held out her handkerchief with a look which

signified, "Put the letter inside." Then, as the king had placed his own handkerchief upon his chair, he was adroit enough to let it fall on the ground, so that La Vallière slipped her handkerchief on the chair. The king took it up quietly, without any one observing what he did, placed the letter within it, and returned the handkerchief to the chair. There was only just time for La Vallière to stretch out her hand to take the handkerchief with its valuable contents.

But Madame, who had observed everything that had passed, said to Mademoiselle de Châtillon, "Châtillon, be good enough to pick up the king's handkerchief, if you please; it has fallen on the carpet."

The young girl obeyed with the utmost precipitation; and the king having moved from his seat, and La Vallière being in no little degree nervous and confused, another handkerchief was seen on the chair.

"Ah! I beg your Majesty's pardon," said Mademoiselle de Châtillon; "you have two handkerchiefs, I perceive."

And the king was accordingly obliged to put into his pocket La Vallière's handkerchief as well as his own. He certainly gained that souvenir of Louise; but she lost a copy of verses which had cost the king ten hours' hard labor, and which, so far as she was concerned, was perhaps as good as a long poem. It would be impossible to describe the king's anger and La Vallière's despair; but shortly afterwards a circumstance occurred which was more than remarkable.

When the king left, in order to retire to his own apartments, Malicorne — informed of what had passed, one can hardly tell how — was waiting in the antechamber. The antechambers of the Palais-Royal are naturally dark; and in the evening, as little ceremony was observed at Madame's,

they were but indifferently lighted. Nothing pleased the king more than this dim light. As a general rule, Love, whose mind and heart are constantly in a blaze, dislikes light anywhere else than in the mind and heart. And so the antechamber was dark; a single page carried a torch before the king, who walked on slowly, greatly annoyed at what had recently occurred. Malicorne passed close to the king, almost stumbled against him in fact, and begged his forgiveness with the profoundest humility; but the king, who was in an exceedingly ill temper, was very sharp in his reproof to Malicorne, who disappeared as soon and as quietly as he possibly could. Louis retired to rest, having had that evening a little misunderstanding with the queen; and the next day, as soon as he entered the cabinet, the desire seized him to kiss La Vallière's handkerchief. He called his valet.

"Fetch me," he said, "the coat I wore yesterday evening, but be very sure you do not touch anything it may contain."

The order being obeyed, the king himself searched the pocket of the coat. He found only one handkerchief, and that his own; La Vallière's had disappeared. While busied with all kinds of conjectures and suspicions, a letter was brought to him from La Vallière; it ran in these terms:

"How kind and good of you, my dear Lord, to have sent me those beautiful verses! How full of ingenuity and perseverance your affection is; how is it possible to help loving you so dearly!"

"What does this mean?" thought the king; "there must be some mistake. Look well about," he said to the valet, "for a pocket-handkerchief must be in one of my pockets; and if you do not find it, or if you have touched it —" He reflected for a moment. To make a State matter of the loss of the handkerchief would be to act too

absurdly, and he therefore added, "There was a letter of some importance inside the handkerchief, which had somehow got among the folds of it."

"But, Sire," replied the valet, "your Majesty had only one handkerchief, and that is it."

"True, true," replied the king, setting his teeth hard together. "Oh, poverty, how I envy you! Happy is the man who can empty his own pockets of letters and handkerchiefs!"

He read La Vallière's letter over again, endeavoring to imagine in what conceivable way his verses could have reached their destination. There was a postscript to the letter: —

"I send you back by your messenger this reply, so unworthy of what you sent me."

"Good! I shall find out something now," he said, delightedly. "Who is waiting, and who brought me this letter?"

"M. Malicorne," replied the valet, timidly.

"Let him enter."

Malicorne entered.

"You come from Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the king, with a sigh.

"Yes, Sire."

"And you took Mademoiselle de la Vallière something from me?"

"I, Sire?"

"Yes, you."

"Oh, no, Sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière says so distinctly."

"Oh, Sire, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is mistaken."

The king frowned. "What jest is this?" he said; "explain yourself! Why does Mademoiselle de la Vallière

call you my messenger? What did you take to that lady? Speak, Monsieur, and quickly!"

"Sire, I merely took Mademoiselle de la Vallière a pocket-handkerchief; that was all."

"A handkerchief, — what handkerchief?"

"Sire, at the very moment when I had the misfortune to stumble against your Majesty's person yesterday, — a misfortune which I shall deplore to the last day of my life, especially after the displeasure which you exhibited, — I remained, Sire, motionless with despair, your Majesty being at too great a distance to hear my excuses, when I saw something white lying on the ground."

"Ah!" said the king.

"I stooped down, — it was a pocket-handkerchief. For a moment I had an idea that when I stumbled against your Majesty I must have caused the handkerchief to fall from your pocket; but as I felt it all over very respectfully, I perceived a cipher at one of the corners, and on looking at it closely I found that it was Mademoiselle de la Vallière's cipher. I presumed that on coming thither that young lady had let her handkerchief fall, and I accordingly hastened to restore it to her as she was leaving; and that is all I gave to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I entreat your Majesty to believe." Malicorne's manner was so simple, so full of contrition, and marked with such extreme humility, that the king was greatly amused in listening to him. He was as pleased with him for what he had done as if he had rendered him the greatest service.

"This is the second fortunate meeting I have had with you, Monsieur," he said; "you may count upon my friendship."

The plain and sober truth is that Malicorne had picked the king's pocket of the handkerchief as dexterously as

any of the pickpockets of the good city of Paris could have done. Madame never knew of this little incident; but Montalais gave La Vallière some idea of the manner in which it had really happened, and La Vallière afterwards told the king, who laughed exceedingly at it, and pronounced Malicorne to be a first-rate politician. Louis XIV. was right, and it is well known that he was tolerably acquainted with human nature.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WHICH TREATS OF GARDENERS, OF LADDERS, AND MAIDS OF HONOR.

MIRACLES, unfortunately, could not always last forever, while Madame's ill-humor still continued to last. In a week's time matters had reached such a point that the king could no longer look at La Vallière without a look full of suspicion crossing his own. Whenever a promenade was proposed, Madame, in order to avoid the recurrence of scenes similar to that of the thunderstorm or the royal oak, had a variety of indispositions ready prepared; and, thanks to them, she was unable to go out, and her maids of honor remained indoors. There was not the slightest chance or means of paying a nocturnal visit; for in this respect the king had on the very first occasion experienced a severe check, which happened in the following manner. As at Fontainebleau, he had taken De Saint-Aignan with him one evening, when he wished to pay La Vallière a visit; but he had found no one but Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who had begun to call out "Fire!" and "Thieves!" in such a manner that a perfect legion of chambermaids, attendants, and pages ran to her assistance; so that De Saint-Aignan, who had remained behind in order to save the honor of his royal master, who had fled precipitately, had incurred a severe scolding from the queen-mother as well as from Madame herself. In addition, he had the next morning received two challenges from the De Mortemart family, and the king had been obliged to interfere. This mistake had been owing to the

fact that Madame had suddenly ordered a change in the apartments of her maids of honor, and directed La Vallière and Montalais to sleep in her own boudoir.

Nothing, therefore, was now possible, not even any communication by letter; to write under the eyes of so ferocious an Argus as Madame, whose kindness of disposition was so uncertain, was to run the risk of exposure to the greatest dangers; and it can well be conceived into what a state of continuous irritation and of ever-increasing anger all these petty annoyances threw the young king. He almost tormented himself to death in endeavoring to discover a means of communication; and as he did not unbosom himself to either Malicorne or D'Artagnan, the means were not discovered. Malicorne had, indeed, some occasional brilliant flashes of imagination with which he tried to inspire the king with confidence; but whether from shame or suspicion, the king, who had at first begun to nibble at the bait, soon abandoned the hook. In this way, for instance, one evening, while the king was crossing the garden and looking sadly up at Madame's windows, Malicorne stumbled over a ladder lying beside a border of box, and said to Manicamp, who was walking with him behind the king, and who had not either stumbled over or seen anything, "Did you not see that I just now stumbled against a ladder, and was nearly thrown down?"

"No," said Manicamp, absent-minded as usual; "but it appears that you did not fall."

"That does n't matter; but it is not, on that account, the less dangerous to leave ladders lying about in that manner."

"True, one might hurt himself, especially when absent-minded."

"It is not that; I mean to say that it is dangerous to

allow ladders to lie about like that under the windows of the maids of honor."

Louis started imperceptibly.

"Why so?" inquired Manicamp.

"Speak louder!" whispered Malicorne, as he touched him with his arm.

"Why so?" said Manicamp, louder.

The king listened.

"Because, for instance," said Malicorne, "a ladder nineteen feet high is just the height of the cornice of those windows."

Manicamp, instead of answering, was dreaming of something else.

"Ask me, can't you, what windows I mean," whispered Malicorne.

"But to what windows are you referring?" asked Manicamp, aloud.

"The windows of Madame's apartments."

"Eh!"

"Oh! I don't say that any one would ever venture to climb up into Madame's room; but in Madame's boudoir, separated by a partition, sleep two exceedingly pretty girls, Mesdemoiselles de la Vallière and de Montalais."

"By a mere partition?" said Manicamp.

"Look! you see how brilliantly lighted Madame's apartments are? Well, do you see those two windows?"

"Yes."

"And that window close to the others, but less brightly lighted?"

"Certainly."

"Well, that is the room of the maids of honor. Look! the weather is warm; there is Mademoiselle de la Vallière now, opening the window. Ah, how many soft things could an enterprising lover say to her, if he only suspected

that there was lying here a ladder nineteen feet long, which would just reach the cornice!"

"But she is not alone; you said that Mademoiselle de Montalais is with her."

"Mademoiselle de Montalais counts for nothing; she is her oldest friend, and exceedingly devoted to her, — a positive well, into which can be thrown all sorts of secrets of which one might wish to get rid."

The king had not lost a single syllable of this conversation. Malicorne had even remarked that his Majesty had slackened his pace, in order to give him time to finish. So, when he arrived at the door, he dismissed every one, with the exception of Malicorne, — a circumstance which excited no surprise, for it was known that the king was in love, and they suspected he was going to compose some verses by moonlight; and although there was no moon that evening, the king might nevertheless have some verses to compose. Every one took his leave; and then the king turned towards Malicorne, who respectfully waited until his Majesty should address him.

"What were you saying just now about a ladder, M. Malicorne?" he asked.

"Did I say anything about ladders, Sire?" said Malicorne, gazing into space as if in search of his words which had flown away.

"Yes, of a ladder nineteen feet long."

"Oh, yes, Sire, I remember; but I spoke to M. de Manicamp, and I should not have said a word had I known your Majesty could have heard us."

"And why would you not have said a word?"

"Because I should not have liked to get the gardener scolded who had left it there, — poor fellow!"

"Don't make yourself uneasy on that account! What is this ladder like?"

"If your Majesty wishes to see it, nothing is easier, for there it is."

"In that box-hedge?"

"Exactly."

"Show it to me."

Malicorne turned back and led the king up to the ladder, saying, "Here it is, Sire."

"Pull it this way a little."

When Malicorne had brought the ladder on to the walk, the king began to step its whole length. "Hum!" he said; "you say it is nineteen feet long?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Nineteen feet, — that is rather long; I hardly believe it can be so long as that."

"You cannot judge very correctly with the ladder in that position, Sire. If it were upright, against a tree or a wall for instance, you would be better able to judge, because the comparison would assist you a good deal."

"Oh, it does not matter, M. Malicorne; but I can hardly believe that the ladder is nineteen feet high."

"I know how accurate your Majesty's eye is, and yet I would wager." The king shook his head. "There is one infallible means of verifying it," said Malicorne.

"What is that?"

"Every one knows, Sire, that the lower story of the palace is eighteen feet high."

"True, that is very well known."

"Well, Sire, if I place the ladder against the wall, we shall be able to ascertain."

"True."

Malicorne took up the ladder like a feather, and placed it upright against the wall. And in order to try the experiment, he chose — or chance, perhaps, directed him to choose — the very window of the boudoir where La Val-

lière was. The ladder just reached the edge of the cornice, that is to say, almost to the sill of the window; so that by standing upon the last round but one of the ladder a man of about the middle height, as the king was for instance, could easily hold communication with those who might be in the room. As soon as the ladder had been properly placed, the king, dropping the assumed part he had been playing in the comedy, began to ascend the rounds of the ladder, which Malicorne held at the bottom. But hardly had he completed half of his aerial journey, when a patrol of Swiss Guards appeared in the garden, and advanced straight towards the ladder. The king descended with the utmost precipitation, and concealed himself among the trees.

Malicorne perceived that he must offer himself as a sacrifice; for if he too were to conceal himself, the Guard would search everywhere until they had found either himself or the king, perhaps both. It would be far better, therefore, that he alone should be discovered. Consequently Malicorne hid himself so clumsily that he was the only one arrested. As soon as he was arrested, Malicorne was taken to the guard-house; when there, he declared who he was, and was immediately recognized. In the mean time, by concealing himself first behind one clump of trees and then behind another, the king reached the side-door of his apartments, very much humiliated and still more disappointed. More than that, the noise made in arresting Malicorne had drawn La Vallière and Montalais to their window; and even Madame herself had appeared at her own, with a pair of wax candles, asking what was the matter.

Meanwhile Malicorne sent for D'Artagnan, who did not lose a moment in hurrying to him. But it was in vain that he attempted to make him understand his reasons,

and in vain also that D'Artagnan did understand them; and, further, it was equally in vain that both their sharp and inventive minds endeavored to give another turn to the adventure. There was no other resource left for Malicorne but to let it be supposed that he had wished to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment, as M. de Saint-Aignan had passed for having wished to force Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's door. Madame was inflexible; in the first place, because if M. Malicorne had in fact wished to enter her apartment at night through the window and by the means of the ladder, in order to see Montalais, it was a punishable offence on Malicorne's part, and he must be punished accordingly; and in the second place, if Malicorne, instead of acting in his own name, had acted as an intermediary between La Vallière and a person whom she did not wish to mention, his crime was even greater, since love, which is an excuse for everything, did not exist in that case as an excuse for him. Madame therefore made the greatest possible disturbance about the matter, and obtained his dismissal from Monsieur's household, without reflecting, poor blind creature! that both Malicorne and Montalais held her fast in their clutches in consequence of her visit to M. de Guiche, and in a variety of other ways equally delicate. Montalais, who was perfectly furious, wished to revenge herself immediately; but Malicorne pointed out to her that the king's countenance was worth all the disgraces in the world, and that it was a great thing to have to suffer on his Majesty's account.

Malicorne was perfectly right, and therefore, although Montalais was a woman, nay, even had the spirit of ten women in her, he succeeded in bringing her round to his own opinion. And we must not omit to state that the king helped them to console themselves; for in the first

place he presented Malicorne with fifty thousand livres as a compensation for the post he had lost, and in the next place he gave him an appointment in his own household, delighted to have an opportunity of revenging himself in such a manner upon Madame for all she had made him and La Vallière suffer. But as he no longer had Malicorne to steal his pocket-handkerchiefs and to measure ladders for him, the poor lover was destitute. There seemed to be no hope of ever getting near La Vallière again, so long as she should remain at the Palais-Royal. All the dignities and all the money in the world could not remedy that. Fortunately, however, Malicorne was on the look-out, and he succeeded in meeting Montalais, who on her part, it must be admitted, did her best to meet Malicorne.

"What do you do during the night in Madame's apartment?" Malicorne asked the young girl.

"Why, at night I go to sleep," she replied.

"But it is very wrong to sleep; it is unseemly for a girl who is suffering as you are to sleep."

"And from what am I suffering, may I ask?"

"Are you not in despair at my absence?"

"Of course not, since you have received fifty thousand livres and an appointment in the king's household."

"Never mind! You are exceedingly afflicted at not seeing me as you used to see me formerly, and more than all, you are in despair at my having lost Madame's confidence; come now, is not that true?"

"Perfectly true."

"Very good; your distress of mind prevents you from sleeping at night, and so you sob and sigh, and blow your nose ten times every minute as loud as possible."

"But, my dear Malicorne, Madame cannot endure the slightest noise near her."

"I know that perfectly well, — of course she can't endure anything; and so, I tell you, she will not lose a minute, when she sees your deep distress, in turning you out of her room."

"I understand."

"It is very fortunate that you do."

"Well, and what will happen next?"

"The next thing that will happen will be that La Vallière, finding herself alone without you, will break the stillness of the night with such groans and such loud lamentations that she will exhibit despair enough for two."

"In that case she will be put into another room."

"Yes; but which?"

"Which? You seem to be puzzled, Mr. Inventor-General."

"Not at all; wherever and whatever the room may be, it will always be preferable to Madame's own room."

"That is true."

"Well, begin your lamentations a little to-night."

"I certainly will not fail to do so."

"And give La Vallière a hint also."

"Oh, never fear! She cries quite enough already to herself."

"Very well, all she has to do is to cry out loudly."

And they separated.

CHAPTER XL.

WHICH TREATS OF CARPENTRY OPERATIONS, AND FURNISHES DETAILS UPON THE MODE OF CONSTRUCTING STAIRCASES.

THE advice which had been given to Montalais was communicated by her to La Vallière, who saw that it was wanting in wisdom, but who after a certain amount of resistance, arising rather from timidity than from indifference to the project, resolved to put it into execution. This story of the two girls weeping, and filling Madame's bedroom with sounds of lamentation, was Malicorne's *chef-d'œuvre.* As nothing is so probable as improbability, so natural as romance, this Arabian Nights tale succeeded perfectly with Madame. First she sent away Montalais; and then three days, or rather three nights, afterwards, she had La Vallière removed. To the latter she gave one of the small rooms on the top story, situated immediately over the apartments allotted to the gentlemen.

One story only — that is to say, a mere flooring — separated the maids of honor from the officers and gentlemen of her husband's household. A private staircase, which was placed under Madame de Navailles's surveillance, was the only means of communication. For greater safety, Madame de Navailles, who had heard of his Majesty's previous attempts, had the windows of the rooms and the openings of the chimneys carefully barred. There was, therefore, every possible security provided for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose room bore more resemblance to a cage than to anything else. When Mademoiselle de la

Vallière was in her own room, — and she was there very frequently, for Madame scarcely ever had any occasion for her services when once she knew she was safe under Madame de Navailles's inspection, — Mademoiselle de la Vallière had no other means of amusing herself than that of looking through the bars of her window.

It happened, therefore, that one morning, as she was looking out as usual, she perceived Malicorne at one of the windows exactly opposite to her own. He held a carpenter's rule in his hand, was surveying the buildings, and seemed to be calculating some algebraic formulas on paper. He somewhat resembled those engineers who, hidden in a trench, get the elevation of the angles of a bastion or take the height of the walls of a fortress. La Vallière recognized Malicorne, and bowed to him; Malicorne, in his turn, replied by a profound bow, and disappeared from the window. She was surprised at this marked coolness, so inconsistent with his unfailing good humor; but she remembered that the poor fellow had lost his appointment on her account, and that he could hardly be very amiably disposed towards her, since in all probability she would never be in a position to make him any recompense for what he had lost. She knew how to forgive offences, and with still greater reason could she sympathize with misfortune. La Vallière would have asked Montalais her opinion if she had been there; but she was absent, it being the hour she usually devoted to her own correspondence. Suddenly La Vallière observed an object, thrown from the window at which Malicorne had appeared, pass across the open space, enter her room through the iron bars, and roll upon the floor. She advanced with no little curiosity towards this object, and picked it up; it was one of those spools upon which silk is wound, only in this instance instead of silk a small piece of paper was

wrapped round it. La Vallière unrolled it and read the following: —

MADEMOISELLE, — I am exceedingly anxious to learn two things: the first is whether the flooring of your apartment is of wood or brick; the second, at what distance from the window your bed is placed. Forgive my importunity, and will you be good enough to send me an answer by the same way by which you receive this letter, — that is to say, by means of the spool; only, instead of throwing it into my room, as I have thrown it into yours, which will be too difficult for you to attempt, have the goodness merely to let it fall.

Believe me, Mademoiselle, your most humble and most respectful servant, MALICORNE.

Write the reply, if you please, upon the letter itself.

"Ah, poor fellow!" exclaimed La Vallière, "he must have gone out of his mind;" and she directed towards her correspondent, of whom she caught but a faint glimpse in the darkness of his room, a look full of kind compassion.

Malicorne understood her, and shook his head as if to reply to her, "No, no, I am not out of my mind; be quite satisfied."

La Vallière smiled as if still in doubt.

"No, no," Malicorne signified by a gesture, "my head is all right;" and he pointed to his head. Then, after moving his hand like a man who writes very rapidly, he put his hands together as if entreating her to write.

La Vallière, even if he were mad, saw no impropriety in doing what Malicorne requested her. She took a pencil and wrote, "Wood;" and then counted ten paces from her window to her bed, and wrote, "ten paces;" and having done this she looked out again at Malicorne, who bowed to her, signifying that he was about to descend. La Vallière understood that it was to pick up the spool

She approached the window, and in accordance with Malicorne's instructions, let it fall. The winder was still rolling along the flag-stones as Malicorne started after it, overtook and picked it up, began to peel it as a monkey would a nut, and ran straight towards the abode of M. de Saint-Aignan.

De Saint-Aignan had taken care that his rooms should be as near the king as possible, as certain plants seek the sun's rays in order to develop themselves more luxuriantly. His apartment consisted of two rooms in that portion of the palace occupied by Louis XIV. himself. M. de Saint-Aignan was very proud of this proximity, which afforded easy access to his Majesty, and more than that, the favor of occasional unexpected meetings. At the moment to which we are now referring he was engaged in having both his rooms magnificently carpeted, with the expectation of receiving the honor of frequent visits from the king; for his Majesty, since his passion for La Vallière, had chosen De Saint-Aignan as his confidant, and could not do without him either night or day. Malicorne introduced himself to the count, and met with no difficulties, because he had been favorably noticed by the king, and the credit which one man may happen to enjoy is always a bait for others.

De Saint-Aignan asked his visitor if he were the fortunate possessor of any news.

"Yes, great news," replied the latter.

"Ah!" said De Saint-Aignan, inquisitive like all favorites; "what is it?"

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière has changed her quarters."

"What do you mean?" said De Saint-Aignan, opening his eyes very wide. "She was living in the same apartments with Madame."

"Precisely so; but Madame got tired of her proximity,

and has installed her in a room which is situated exactly above your future apartment."

"What! up there!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan, with surprise, and pointing at the floor above him with his finger.

"No," said Malicorne, "yonder," — indicating the building opposite.

"What do you mean, then, by saying that her room is above my apartment?"

"Because I am sure that your apartment ought most naturally to be under La Vallière's room."

De Saint-Aignan, at this remark, gave poor Malicorne a look similar to one of those La Vallière had already given him a quarter of an hour before; that is to say, he thought Malicorne had lost his senses.

"Monsieur," said Malicorne to him, "I ask leave to answer your thoughts."

"What! my thoughts?"

"Certainly; you have not clearly understood, it seems to me, what I meant to convey."

"I admit that."

"Well, then, you are aware that underneath the apartments set apart for Madame's maids of honor the gentlemen in attendance on the king and on Monsieur are lodged."

"Yes, I know that, since Manicamp, De Wardes, and others are living there."

"Precisely. Well, Monsieur, observe the singularity of the circumstance; the two rooms destined for M. de Guiche are exactly the very two rooms situated underneath those which Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de la Vallière occupy."

"Well; what then?"

"What then, do you say? Why, these two rooms are empty, since M. de Guiche is now lying wounded at Fontainebleau."

"I assure you, my dear Monsieur, I cannot guess your meaning."

"Well! if I had the happiness to call myself De Saint-Aignan, I should guess immediately."

"And what would you do, then?"

"I should at once change the rooms I am occupying here, for those which M. de Guiche is not using yonder."

"Can you suppose such a thing?" said De Saint-Aignan, disdainfully. "What! abandon the chief post of honor, the proximity to the king, — a privilege conceded only to princes of the blood, to dukes and peers! Permit me to tell you, my dear M. de Malicorne, that you must be out of your senses."

"Monsieur," replied the young man, seriously, "you commit two mistakes. My name is Malicorne, simply; and I am in perfect possession of all my senses." Then, drawing a paper from his pocket, he said, "Listen to what I am going to say; and afterwards, I will show you this paper."

"I am listening," said De Saint-Aignan.

"You know that Madame watches over La Vallière as carefully as Argus watched over the nymph Io."

"I do."

"You know that the king has sought for an opportunity, but in vain, of speaking to the fair prisoner, and that neither you nor myself have yet succeeded in procuring him this piece of good fortune."

"You certainly ought to know something on that subject, my poor Malicorne."

"Very good; what do you suppose would happen to the man whose imagination devised some means of bringing the two lovers together?"

"Oh, the king would have no bounds to his gratitude!"

"M. de Saint-Aignan, would you not be desirous to taste a little of this royal gratitude?"

"Certainly," replied De Saint-Aignan, "any favor from my master, when I may have done my duty, can only be most precious to me."

"In that case look at this paper, Monsieur the Count."

"What is it, — a plan?"

"Yes; a plan of M. de Guiche's two rooms, which in all probability will soon be your two rooms."

"Oh, no, whatever may happen!"

"Why so?"

"Because my own rooms are the envy of too many gentlemen, to whom I certainly shall not give them up, — M. de Roquelaure, for instance, M. de la Ferté, and M. Dangeau."

"In that case I shall leave you, Monsieur the Count, and I shall go and offer to one of those gentlemen the plan I have just shown you, together with the advantages annexed to it."

"But why do you not keep them for yourself?" inquired De Saint-Aignan, suspiciously.

"Because the king would never do me the honor of paying me a visit openly, while he would readily go and see any one of those gentlemen."

"What! the king would go and see any one of those gentlemen?"

"Go! most certainly would he, ten times instead of once. Is it possible you can ask me if the king would go to an apartment which would bring him nearer to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Admirably near her, with a whole floor between them!"

Malicorne unfolded the piece of paper, which had been wrapped round the bobbin. "Monsieur the Count," he said, "pray observe that the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room is merely a wooden flooring."

"Well?"

"Well! you will get hold of a journeyman carpenter, lock him up in your apartment without letting him know where you have taken him, and let him make a hole in your ceiling, and consequently in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's floor."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan, as if dazzled.

"What is the matter?" said Malicorne.

"I say that you have hit upon a singularly bold idea, Monsieur."

"It will seem a very trifling one to the king, I assure you."

"Lovers never think of the risk they run."

"What danger do you apprehend, Monsieur the Count?"

"Why, effecting such an opening as that will make a terrible noise; it will be heard throughout the entire palace."

"Oh, Monsieur the Count, I am quite sure that the carpenter I shall select will not make the slightest noise. He will saw an opening six feet square, with a saw muffled with tow; and no one, not even those in the immediate vicinity, will know that he is at work."

"My dear M. Malicorne, you astound, you positively bewilder me."

"To continue," replied Malicorne, quietly, "in the room the ceiling of which you have cut through you will put up a staircase, which will either allow Mademoiselle de la Vallière to descend into your room, or the king to ascend into Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"But the staircase will be seen."

"No; for in your room it will be hidden by a partition, over which you will throw a tapestry similar to that which

adorns the rest of the apartment. And in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room it will not be seen; for the trap-door, which will be a part of the flooring itself, will be made to open under the bed."

"Of course," said De Saint-Aignan, whose eyes began to sparkle with delight.

"And now, Monsieur the Count, there is no occasion to make you admit that the king will frequently come to the room where such a staircase may be constructed. I think that M. Dangeau particularly will be struck by my idea, and I shall now go and explain it to him."

"But, my dear M. Malicorne," cried De Saint-Aignan, "you forget that you spoke to me about it first, and that I have, consequently, the right of priority."

"Do you wish for the preference, then?"

"Do I wish it? I should think so!"

"The fact is, M. de Saint-Aignan, I am presenting you with that which is as good as the promise of an additional step in the peerage, and perhaps even a good estate to accompany your dukedom."

"At least," replied De Saint-Aignan, reddening with pleasure, "it will give me an opportunity of showing the king that he is not mistaken in occasionally calling me his friend, — an opportunity, dear M. Malicorne, for which I shall be indebted to you."

"And which you will not forget to remember?" inquired Malicorne, smiling.

"Nothing will delight me more, Monsieur,"

"But I am not the king's friend, Monsieur; I am simply his attendant."

"Yes; and if you imagine that that staircase is as good as a dukedom for myself, I think there will certainly be letters of nobility for you."

Malicorne bowed.

"All I have to do now," said De Saint-Aignan, "is to move as soon as possible."

"I do not think that the king will object to it; ask his permission, however."

"I will go and see him this very moment."

"And I will run and get the carpenter of whom I was speaking."

"When shall I have him?"

"This very evening."

"Do not forget your precautions."

"He shall be brought with his eyes bandaged."

"And I will send you one of my carriages."

"Without arms."

"With one of my servants without livery, — is it agreed?"

"Very well, Monsieur the Count."

"But stay! What will La Vallière say if she sees what is going on?"

"Oh! I can assure you that she will be very much interested in the operation; and I am equally sure that if the king has not courage enough to ascend to her room, she will have sufficient curiosity to come down."

"We will live in hope," said De Saint-Aignan; "and now I am off to his Majesty. At what time this evening will my carpenter begin?"

"At eight o'clock."

"How long do you suppose he will take to make this opening?"

"About two hours; only afterwards he must have sufficient time to effect what may be called the junction between the two rooms. One night and a portion of the following day will do; we must not reckon upon less than two days, including putting up the staircase."

"Two days! That is very long."

"Nay; when one undertakes to open a door into paradise itself, we must at least take care that it is properly done."

"Quite right; so farewell for a short time, dear M. Malicorne. I shall begin to remove the day after to-morrow, in the evening."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE RIDE BY TORCHLIGHT.

De Saint-Aignan, delighted with what he had just heard, and elated by his expectations, bent his steps towards De Guiche's two rooms. He who a quarter of an hour previous would not have yielded up his own rooms for a million livres, was now ready to pay a million, if it were necessary, for the two rooms he now coveted. But he did not meet with so many obstacles. M. de Guiche did not yet know where he was to lodge, and, besides, was still suffering too much to trouble himself about his lodgings; and so De Saint-Aignan obtained De Guiche's two rooms without difficulty. M. Dangeau, on the other hand, obtained De Saint-Aignan's two rooms, paying to the count's steward a bonus of six thousand livres, and thought he had the best of the bargain. Dangeau's two rooms were to be De Guiche's future abode. This was all; we do not affirm very positively that, in the general moving about, those were the two rooms which De Guiche did occupy. As for M. Dangeau, he was so immeasurably delighted that he did not even give himself the trouble to think whether De Saint-Aignan had any particular reason for removing.

Within an hour after De Saint-Aignan's new resolution, he was in possession of the two rooms; and ten minutes later Malicorne entered, followed by the upholsterers. During this time the king asked for De Saint-Aignan; the valet ran to his late apartments and found Dangeau there; Dangeau sent him on to De Guiche's, and De

Saint-Aignan was at last found; but a little delay had of course taken place, and the king had already exhibited once or twice evident signs of impatience, when De Saint-Aignan entered his royal master's presence, quite out of breath. "You, too, abandon me, then," said Louis XIV., in a tone of lamentation similar to that with which Cæsar eighteen hundred years previous had spoken the *Tu quoque.*

"Sire," said De Saint-Aignan, "I am not abandoning your Majesty, quite the contrary; only, I am busily occupied in changing my lodgings."

"What do you mean? I thought that you had finished moving three days ago."

"Yes, Sire; but I don't find myself comfortable where I am, and so I am going to change to the opposite side of the building."

"Was I not right when I said that you were abandoning me?" exclaimed the king. "Oh, this exceeds all endurance! But so it is. There was only one woman for whom my heart cared at all, and all my family is leagued together to tear her from me. I had a friend to whom I confided my distress, and who helped me to bear up under it, and now he has become wearied of my complaints, and is going to leave me without even asking my permission."

De Saint-Aignan began to laugh.

The king at once guessed that there must be some mystery in this want of respect. "What is it?" cried he, full of hope.

"This, Sire, — that the friend whom the king calumniates is going to try to restore to his sovereign the happiness he has lost."

"Are you going to enable me to see La Vallière?" said Louis XIV.

"I cannot say positively, Sire; but I hope so."

"How?—how? Tell me that, De Saint-Aignan! I wish to know what your project is, and to help you with all my power."

"Sire," replied De Saint-Aignan, "I cannot, even myself, tell very well how I must set about attaining success; but I have every reason to believe that from to-morrow —"

"To-morrow, do you say? What happiness! But why are you changing your rooms?"

"In order to serve your Majesty to greater advantage."

"And how can your moving serve me?"

"Do you happen to know where the two rooms destined for the Comte de Guiche are situated?"

"Yes."

"Well, your Majesty now knows where I am going."

"Very likely; but that does not help me."

"What! is it possible that you do not understand, Sire, that above these lodgings are two rooms, one of which is Mademoiselle de Montalais's, and the other —"

"La Vallière's, is it not so, De Saint-Aignan? Oh, yes, yes! It is a brilliant idea, De Saint-Aignan, a true friend's idea, a poet's idea, — in bringing me nearer her when the whole world separates me from her. You are far more to me than Pylades was to Orestes, or Patroclus to Achilles."

"Sire," said De Saint-Aignan, with a smile, "I question whether, if your Majesty were to know my projects to their full extent, you would continue to confer such pompous qualifications upon me. Ah, Sire, I know how very different are the epithets which certain Puritans of the court will not fail to apply to me when they learn what I intend to do for your Majesty."

"De Saint-Aignan, I am dying from impatience; I am

in a perfect fever; I shall never be able to wait until to-morrow. To-morrow! why, to-morrow is an eternity!"

"And yet, Sire, I shall require you, if you please, to go out presently and divert your impatience by a little excursion."

"With you, — agreed! We will talk about your projects; we will talk of her."

"Nay, Sire; I remain here."

"With whom shall I go out, then?"

"With the ladies."

"Nothing shall induce me to do that, De Saint-Aignan."

"Sire, you *must* do it."

"No, no, — a thousand times, no! I will never again expose myself to the horrible torture of being close to her, of seeing her, of touching her dress as I pass by her, and yet of not being able to say a word to her. No, I renounce an ordeal which you suppose to be happiness, but which is a torture that consumes and eats away my very life, — to see her in the presence of strangers and not to tell her that I love her, when my whole being reveals my affection and betrays me to every one! No, I have sworn never to do it again, and I will keep my oath."

"Yet, Sire, pray listen to me for a moment."

"I will listen to nothing, De Saint-Aignan."

"In that case I will continue. It is most urgent, Sire, — pray understand me, it is of the greatest importance, — that Madame and her maids of honor should be absent for two hours from the palace."

"I cannot understand your meaning at all, De Saint-Aignan."

"It is hard for me to give directions to my king, but in this circumstance I do give you directions, Sire; and a hunt or a drive is essential to my purposes."

"But this hunt, this drive, would be a caprice, a mere

whim. In displaying such an impatient humor I show my whole court that I have no control over my own feelings. Do not people already say that I dream of conquering the world, but that I ought to begin by conquering myself?"

"Those who say so, Sire, are insolent and factious persons; but whoever they may be, if your Majesty prefers to listen to them, I have nothing further to say. In that case what we have appointed for to-morrow must be postponed indefinitely."

"Nay, De Saint-Aignan, I will go out this evening, — I will go by torchlight to sleep at St. Germain; I will breakfast there to-morrow, and will return to Paris by three o'clock. Will that do?"

"Admirably."

"Then I will set out this evening at eight o'clock."

"Your Majesty has hit the exact minute."

"And you positively will tell me nothing more?"

"It is because I have nothing more to tell you. Industry goes for something in this world, Sire; but yet Chance plays so important a part in it that I have been accustomed to leave her the narrowest part, confident that she will manage so as always to take the widest."

"Well, I abandon myself entirely to you."

"And you are quite right."

Comforted in this manner, the king went immediately to Madame, to whom he announced the intended expedition. Madame fancied from the very first moment that she saw in this unexpectedly arranged party a plot of the king to gain an interview with La Vallière, either on the road, under cover of the darkness, or in some other way; but she took especial care to reveal none of her thoughts to her brother-in-law, and accepted the invitation with a smile upon her lips. She gave directions aloud that her maids

of honor should accompany her, secretly intending in the evening to take the most effectual steps to interfere with his Majesty's attachment. Then, when she was alone, and at the very moment when the poor lover, who had issued his orders for the departure, was revelling in the idea that Mademoiselle de la Vallière would form one of the party, — at the very moment, perhaps, when he was luxuriating in the sad happiness which persecuted lovers enjoy of realizing by the sense of sight alone all the delights of an interdicted possession, — at that very moment, we say, Madame, who was surrounded by her maids of honor, said, "Two ladies will be enough for me this evening, — Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais."

La Vallière had anticipated the blow, and thus was prepared for it; but persecution had rendered her courageous, and she did not give Madame the pleasure of seeing on her face the impression of the shock her heart had received. On the contrary, smiling with that ineffable gentleness which gave an angelic expression to her features, "In that case, Madame, I shall be at liberty this evening, I suppose," she said.

"Of course."

"I shall profit by that to progress with that piece of tapestry which your Highness has been good enough to notice, and which I have already had the honor of offering to you." And having made a respectful obeisance, she withdrew to her own room; Mesdemoiselles de Tonnay-Charente and de Montalais did the same.

The report of the intended expedition went with them from Madame's chamber, and was soon spread all over the palace. Ten minutes afterwards Malicorne learned Madame's resolution, and slipped under Montalais's door a note in the following terms: —

"L. V. must pass the night with Madame."

Montalais, in pursuance of the compact she had entered into, began by burning the paper, and then sat down to reflect. Montalais was a girl full of expedients, and so had very soon arranged her plan. Towards five o'clock, which was the hour for her to repair to Madame's apartment, she was running across the courtyard, and on arriving within a dozen paces of a group of officers, she uttered a cry, fell gracefully on one knee, rose again, and walked on limping. The gentlemen ran forward to her assistance. Montalais had sprained her foot. Faithful to the discharge of her duty, she insisted, however, upon going up to Madame's apartment.

"What is the matter, and why do you limp so?" the latter inquired; "I mistook you for La Vallière."

Montalais related how it had happened, — that in hurrying on, in order to arrive as quickly as possible, she had sprained her foot. Madame seemed to pity her, and wished to have a surgeon sent for immediately; but she, assuring her that there was nothing really serious in the accident, said, "My only regret, Madame, is that it will preclude my attendance on you; and I should have begged Mademoiselle de la Vallière to take my place with your royal Highness —" Seeing that Madame frowned, she added, "But I have not done so."

"And why did you not do so?" inquired Madame.

"Because poor La Vallière seemed so happy to have her liberty for a whole evening and night too, that I did not feel courageous enough to ask her to take my place."

"What! is she so delighted as that?" inquired Madame, struck by these words.

"She is wild with delight; she, who is always so melancholy, was singing like a bird. Besides, your High-
knows that she detests going out, and also that her
ter has a spice of wildness in it."

"Oh!" thought Madame, "this extreme delight hardly seems natural to me."

"She has already made all her preparations," continued Montalais, "for dining in her own room *tête-à-tête* with one of her favorite books. And then, as your Highness has six other young ladies who would be delighted to accompany you, I did not make my proposal to Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

Madame did not say a word in reply.

"Have I acted properly?" continued Montalais, with a slight fluttering of the heart, seeing the ill-success that attended the *ruse de guerre* which she had relied upon with so much confidence that she had not thought it even necessary to try to find another. "Does Madame approve of what I have done?" she continued.

Madame was reflecting that the king could very easily leave St. Germain during the night, and that as it was only four leagues and a half from Paris to St. Germain, he might very easily be in Paris in an hour's time. "Tell me," she said, "whether La Vallière, when she heard of your accident, offered at least to bear you company."

"Oh! she does not yet know of my accident; but even did she know of it, I should most certainly not ask her to do anything which might interfere with her own plans. I think she wishes this evening to realize quietly by herself that amusement of the late king, when he said to M. de Cinq-Mars, 'Let us amuse ourselves by doing nothing and making ourselves miserable.'"

Madame felt convinced that some mysterious love-adventure was hidden beneath this strong desire for solitude. This mystery might possibly be Louis's return during the night; it could not be doubted any longer, — La Vallière had been informed of his intended return, and that was the reason of her delight at having to remain behind

at the Palais-Royal. It was all a plan, and arranged beforehand.

"I will not be their dupe, though," said Madame; and she took a decisive step. "Mademoiselle de Montalais," she said, "will you have the goodness to inform your friend, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, that I am exceedingly sorry to disarrange her projects of solitude, but that instead of making herself miserable alone in her own room, as she wished, she will be good enough to accompany us to St. Germain and make herself miserable there."

"Ah! poor La Vallière!" said Montalais, compassionately, but with her heart throbbing with delight. "Oh, Madame, could there not be some means —"

"Enough!" said Madame, "I desire it! I prefer Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc's society to that of any one else. Go and send her to me, and take care of your foot."

Montalais did not wait for the order to be repeated; she returned to her room, wrote an answer to Malicorne, and slipped it under the carpet. The answer simply said: "She will go." A Spartan could not have written more laconically.

"By this arrangement," thought Madame, "I can watch her narrowly on the road; she will sleep near me during the night, and his Majesty must be very clever if he can exchange a single word with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

La Vallière received the order to set off with the same gentle indifference with which she had received the order to remain. But inwardly her delight was extreme, and she looked upon this change in the princess's resolution as a consolation which Providence had sent her. With less penetration than Madame possessed, she attributed all to chance.

While all, with the exception of those in disgrace, of those who were ill, and of those who were suffering from

sprains, were proceeding towards St. Germain, Malicorne brought his workman to the palace in one of M. de Saint-Aignan's carriages, and led him into the room under La Vallière's. The man set to work, allured by the splendid reward which had been promised him. As the very best tools and implements had been selected from the stock belonging to the engineers attached to the king's household, — and among others a saw with such invincible teeth that it could, under water even, cut through oaken joists as hard as iron, — the work advanced rapidly; and a square portion of the ceiling, taken from between two of the joists, fell into the arms of De Saint-Aignan, Malicorne, the workman, and a confidential valet, — the latter being a person brought into the world to see and hear everything, but to repeat nothing.

In accordance with a new plan indicated by Malicorne, the opening was effected in an angle of the room, and for this reason, — as there was no dressing-closet adjoining La Vallière's room, she had solicited, and had that very morning obtained, a large screen intended to serve as a partition. The screen which had been conceded was quite sufficient to conceal the opening, which would besides be hidden by all the artifices which cabinet-makers have at their command. The opening having been made, the workman slipped himself between the joists, and found himself in La Vallière's room. When there, he cut a square opening in the floor, and out of the boards he manufactured a trap fitting so accurately into the opening that the most practised eye could hardly detect the unavoidable interstices where it joined the floor. Malicorne had provided for everything: a ring and a couple of hinges, which had been bought for the purpose, were affixed to the trap-door; and a small circular staircase had been bought ready-made by the industrious Malicorne, who had paid

two thousand livres for it. It was higher than was required; but the carpenter reduced the number of steps and it was found to fit exactly. This staircase, destined to receive so illustrious a weight, was merely fastened to the wall by a couple of iron clamps; and its base was fixed into the floor of the count's room by two iron pegs screwed down so tightly that the king and his whole council might have passed up and down the staircase without any fear. Every blow of the hammer fell upon a thick pad or cushion, and the saw was not used until the handle had been wrapped in wool, and the blade steeped in oil. The noisiest part of the work, moreover, had taken place during the night and early in the morning, — that is to say, when La Vallière and Madame were both absent.

When, about two o'clock in the afternoon, the court returned to the Palais-Royal, La Vallière went up into her room. Everything was in its place; and not the smallest particle of sawdust, not the smallest chip, was left to bear witness to the violation of her domicile. De Saint-Aignan, however, who had wished to aid all he possibly could in the work, had torn his fingers and his shirt too, and had expended no ordinary quantity of perspiration in his king's service. The palms of his hands, especially, were covered with blisters, occasioned by his having held the ladder for Malicorne. He had moreover brought, one by one, the five pieces of the staircase, each consisting of two steps. In fact, we can safely assert that if the king had seen him so ardently at work, his Majesty would have sworn eternal gratitude towards him. As Malicorne, that man of accurate judgment, had anticipated, the workman had completely finished the job in twenty-four hours; he received twenty-four louis, and left overwhelmed with de-

, for that was as much as he would ordinarily have

earned in six months. No one had the slightest suspicion of what had taken place in the room under Mademoiselle de la Vallière's apartment. But in the evening of the second day, at the very moment La Vallière had just left Madame's circle and had returned to her own room, she heard a slight creaking sound at the end of the chamber. Astonished, she looked to see whence it proceeded; and the noise began again. "Who is there?" she said, in a tone of alarm.

"I," replied the well-known voice of the king.

"You! you!" cried the young girl, who for a moment fancied herself under the influence of a dream. "But where? You, Sire?"

"Here," replied the king, opening one of the folds of the screen, and appearing like a ghost at the end of the room.

La Vallière uttered a loud cry, and fell trembling into an arm-chair, as the king advanced respectfully towards her.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE APPARITION.

La Vallière very soon recovered from her surprise; for owing to his respectful bearing, the king inspired her with more confidence by his presence than his sudden appearance had deprived her of. But as he noticed that what made La Vallière most uneasy was the mystery of his entrance into her room, he explained to her the system of the staircase concealed by the screen, and especially denied being a supernatural appearance.

"Oh, Sire!" said La Vallière, shaking her fair head with a most engaging smile, "present or absent, you do not appear to my mind more at one time than at another."

"Which means, Louise —"

"Oh! what you know so well, Sire, — that there is not one moment in which the poor girl whose secret you surprised at Fontainebleau, and whom you came to snatch from the foot of the cross itself, does not think of you."

"Louise, you overwhelm me with joy and happiness."

La Vallière smiled mournfully, and continued: "But, Sire, have you reflected that your ingenious invention could not be of the slightest service to us?"

"Why so? Tell me. I am waiting most anxiously!"

"Because this room in which I abide is liable to be visited at any moment of the day. Madame herself may by chance come here; my companions run in at any moment they please. To fasten the door on the inside would

be to denounce myself as plainly as if I had written over it, 'No admittance; the king is here.' Even now, Sire, at this very moment there is nothing to prevent the door from opening, and your Majesty from being seen here."

"In that case," said the king, laughingly, "I should indeed be taken for a phantom, for no one can tell in what way I came here. Now, it is only phantoms who can pass through walls or ceilings."

"Oh, Sire, what an adventure! Reflect for a moment how terrible the scandal would be! Nothing equal to it has ever been said about the maids of honor, poor creatures! — whom evil report, however, hardly ever spares."

"And your conclusion from all this, my dear Louise — come, explain yourself!"

"Alas! forgive me, it is a hard thing to say, — but your Majesty must suppress staircase, plots, and surprises; for the evil consequences which would result from your being found here, believe me, Sire, would be far greater than our happiness in seeing each other."

"Well, dear Louise," replied the king, tenderly, "instead of removing this staircase by which I have ascended, there is a far more simple means, of which you have not thought."

"A means, — another means?"

"Yes, another. Oh, you do not love me as I love you, Louise, since my invention is quicker than yours."

She looked at the king, who held out his hand to her, which she took and gently pressed between her own.

"You were saying," continued the king, "that I shall be detected coming here, where any one who pleases can enter."

"Stay, Sire; at this very moment, even while you are speaking about it, I tremble with dread of your being discovered."

"But you would not be found out, Louise, if you were to descend that staircase and go to the rooms underneath."

"Oh, Sire! what do you say?" cried La Vallière, in alarm.

"You do not quite understand me, Louise, since you take such great offence at my very first word; first of all, do you know to whom the apartments underneath belong?"

"Why, to M. le Comte de Guiche, Sire."

"Not at all; they are M. de Saint-Aignan's."

"Truly?" cried La Vallière; and this exclamation which escaped from the young girl's joyous heart made the king's heart throb with delight.

"Yes, to De Saint-Aignan, our friend," he said.

"But, Sire," returned La Vallière, "I cannot visit M. de Saint-Aignan's rooms any more than I could M. le Comte de Guiche's. It is impossible, — impossible."

"And yet, Louise, I should think that under the safeguard of the king you could venture anything."

"Under the safeguard of the king?" she said, with a look full of tenderness.

"You have faith in my word, I hope."

"Yes, Sire, when you are not present; but when you are present, when you speak to me, when I look upon you, I have faith in nothing."

"What do you need to reassure you?"

"It is scarcely respectful, I know, to doubt the king thus; but to me you are not the king."

"Thank Heaven! I, at least, hope so most fervently; you see how anxiously I am trying to find an expedient. Stay! would the presence of a third person reassure you?"

"The presence of M. de Saint-Aignan would, certainly"

"Really, Louise, you wound my heart by your suspicions."

Louise did not answer. She merely looked steadfastly at him with that clear, piercing gaze which penetrates the very heart, and said softly to herself, "Alas, alas! it is not you of whom I am afraid, — it is not you upon whom my doubts would fall."

"Well," said the king, sighing, "I agree; and M. de Saint-Aignan, who enjoys the inestimable privilege of reassuring you, shall always be present at our conversations, I promise you."

"Really and truly, Sire?"

"Upon my honor as a gentleman; and you, on your side — "

"Oh, wait, Sire! that is not all yet."

"Still something else, Louise?"

"Oh, certainly! do not go so fast, for we are not yet at the end, Sire."

"Well, finish by rending my heart!"

"You perfectly well understand, Sire, that such conversations ought at least to have a reasonable motive of some kind for M. de Saint-Aignan."

"A reasonable motive," returned the king, in a tone of tender reproach.

"Certainly, Sire. Consider!"

"Dear Louise, every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours, and my only wish is to equal you on that point. It shall be just as you wish; therefore our conversation shall have a reasonable subject, and I have already hit upon one; so that from to-morrow, if you like — "

"To-morrow?"

"Do you mean to say that that is not soon enough?" exclaimed the king, caressing La Vallière's throbbing hand between his own.

At this moment the sound of steps was heard in the corridor.

"Sire, Sire!" cried La Vallière, "some one is coming; do you hear? Oh, fly, fly, I implore you!"

The king made but one bound from his chair to conceal himself behind the screen. It was time; for as he drew one of the folds before him, the handle of the door was turned, and Montalais appeared at the threshold. As a matter of course, she entered quite naturally and without any ceremony; for she well knew, the slyboots, that to knock discreetly at the door beforehand would be showing a suspicion towards La Vallière which would be displeasing to her. She accordingly entered; and after a rapid glance around, which showed her two chairs very close to each other, she was so long in shutting the door, which seemed unaccountably difficult to close, that the king had ample time to raise the trap-door, and to descend again to De Saint-Aignan's room.

A noise imperceptible to any ear less acute than hers warned Montalais of the disappearance of the king; she then succeeded in closing the rebellious door, and approached La Vallière.

"Louise," she said to her, "I want to talk to you, and seriously, too, if you will permit."

Louise, agitated as she was, heard not without secret alarm this word *seriously*, upon which Montalais had purposely laid stress. "Good heavens! my dear Aure," she murmured, "what is the matter now?"

"The matter is, my dear friend, that Madame suspects everything."

"Everything of what?"

"Is there any occasion for us to enter into explanations, and do you not understand what I mean? Come, you must have noticed the fluctuations in Madame's humor

during several days past; you must have noticed how she first kept you close beside her, then dismissed you, and then sent for you again."

"It is indeed strange; but I am used to her caprices."

"Wait a moment! You noticed also that Madame, after having excluded you from the excursion yesterday, sent you her orders to take part in it."

"Yes, I did notice it, of course."

"Well, it seems that Madame has now succeeded in obtaining sufficient information; for she has now gone straight to the point, as there is nothing further left in France to withstand the torrent which sweeps away all obstacles before it, — you know what I mean by the torrent?"

La Vallière hid her face in her hands.

"I mean," continued Montalais, pitilessly, "that torrent which has burst through the gates of the Carmelites of Chaillot, and overthrown all the prejudices of the court, as well at Fontainebleau as at Paris."

"Alas, alas!" murmured La Vallière, her face still covered by her hands, and her tears streaming through her fingers.

"Oh, don't distress yourself in that manner, for you have only heard half of your troubles."

"In Heaven's name," exclaimed the young girl, in great anxiety, "what is the matter, now?"

"Well, then, this is how the matter stands. Madame, who can no longer rely upon any further assistance in France, — for she has, one after the other, made use of the two queens, of Monsieur, and the whole court too, — now bethinks herself of a certain person who has certain pretended rights over you."

La Vallière became white as a waxen figure.

"This person," continued Montalais, "is not in Paris at this moment, but, if I am not mistaken, is in England."

"Yes, yes," breathed La Vallière, almost crushed with the weight of her anguish.

"And this person is to be found, I think, at the Court of Charles II.; am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well, this evening a letter has been despatched by Madame to St. James's, with directions for the courier to go straight on to Hampton Court, which it seems is one of the royal residences, situated about a dozen miles from London."

"Yes; well?"

"Well, as Madame writes regularly to London once a fortnight, and as the usual courier left for London not more than three days ago, I have been thinking that some serious circumstance could alone have induced her to take up her pen again so soon, for you know Madame is a very indolent correspondent."

"Oh, yes!"

"This letter has been written, therefore, — something tells me so, at least, — on your account."

"On my account?" repeated the unhappy girl, mechanically.

"And I, who saw the letter lying on Madame's desk before she sealed it, fancied I could read —"

"What did you fancy you could read?"

"I might possibly have been mistaken, though —"

"Tell me, — what was it?"

"The name of Bragelonne."

La Vallière rose, a prey to the most painful agitation. "Montalais," she said, her voice broken by sobs, "all the smiling dreams of youth and innocence have fled already.

I have nothing now to conceal, either from you or from any one else. My life is exposed to every one's inspection, and can be opened like a book, in which all the world can read, from the king himself to the first passer-by. Aure, dearest Aure, what can I do?—what will become of me?"

Montalais approached close to her, and said, "Consult your own heart, of course."

"Well, I do not love M. de Bragelonne. When I say I do not love him, understand that I love him as the most affectionate sister could love the best of brothers; but that is not what he requires, nor what I have promised him."

"In fact, you love the king," said Montalais, "and that is a sufficiently good excuse."

"Yes, I do love the king," hoarsely murmured the young girl, "and I have paid dearly enough for the right to pronounce those words. And now, Montalais, tell me,—what can you do, either for me or against me, in my present position?"

"You must speak more clearly still."

"What am I to say, then?"

"And so you have nothing very particular to tell me?"

"No!" said Louise, in astonishment.

"Very good; and so all you have to ask me is my advice respecting M. Raoul?"

"Nothing else."

"It is a very delicate subject," replied Montalais.

"No, it is nothing of the kind. Ought I to marry him in order to keep the promise I made, or ought I to continue to listen to the king?"

"You have really placed me in a very difficult position," said Montalais, smiling. "You ask me if you ought to marry Raoul, whose friend I am, and whom I shall mor-

tally offend in giving my opinion against him; and then, you ask me if you should cease to listen to the king, — the king whose subject I am, and whom I should also offend if I were to advise you in a particular way. Ah, Louise, Louise, you seem to hold a difficult position at a very cheap rate."

"You have not understood me, Aure," said La Vallière, wounded by the slightly mocking tone which Montalais had assumed. "If I speak of marrying M. de Bragelonne, it is because I can marry him without causing him any dissatisfaction; on the other hand, if I listen to the king, he becomes the usurper of a possession of only moderate worth, indeed, but to which love lends a certain appearance of value. What I ask you, then, is to tell me some means of disengaging myself honorably either from the one or from the other; or rather, I ask you from which side you think I can free myself most honorably."

"My dear Louise," replied Montalais, after a pause, "I am not one of those seven wise men of Greece, and I have no invariable rules of conduct; but on the other hand I have a little experience, and I can assure you that no woman ever asks for such advice as you are now asking without being in a terrible state of embarrassment. Now, you have made a solemn promise, which every principle of honor would require you to fulfil; if therefore you are embarrassed in consequence of having undertaken such an engagement, it is not a stranger's advice (every one is a stranger to a heart full of love), — it is not my advice, I repeat, which will extricate you from your embarrassment. I shall not give it to you, therefore; and for a greater reason still, — because, were I in your place, I should feel much more embarrassed after the advice than before it. All I can do is to repeat what I have already said, — do you wish for my assistance?"

"Yes, yes."

"Very well; that is all. Tell me in what way you wish me to help you, — tell me for and against whom; in this way we shall not make any blunders."

"But, first of all," said La Vallière, pressing her companion's hand, "for whom or against whom do you declare yourself?"

"For you, if you are really and truly my friend."

"Are you not Madame's confidante?"

"I shall be the more useful to you. If I were not to know what is going on in that direction, I should not be able to aid you, and consequently you would not derive any advantage from my acquaintance. Friendships live and thrive upon reciprocal benefits."

"In short, then, you will remain at the same time Madame's friend also?"

"Evidently. Do you complain of that?"

"No," said La Vallière, thoughtfully; for that cynical frankness appeared to her an offence addressed both to the woman and to the friend.

"All well and good, then," said Montalais, "for in that case you would be very foolish."

"You will serve me, then?"

"Devotedly so, especially if you will serve me in return."

"One would almost say that you did not know my heart," said La Vallière, looking at Montalais with her eyes wide open in astonishment.

"Why, the fact is that since we have belonged to the court, my dear Louise, we are very much changed."

"In what way?"

"It is very simple. Were you the second Queen of France yonder, at Blois?"

La Vallière hung down her head, and began to weep.

Montalais looked at her with an indescribable expression, and murmured, "Poor girl!" and then, adding, "Poor king!" she kissed Louise on the forehead, and returned to her apartment, where Malicorne was waiting for her.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE PORTRAIT.

In that malady which is termed love the paroxysms succeed one another at intervals, always more rapid from the moment when the disease declares itself. Later, the paroxysms are less frequent in proportion as the cure approaches. This being laid down as an axiom in general, and as the beginning of a chapter in particular, we will now proceed with our recital. The next day, the day fixed by the king for the first conversation in De Saint-Aignan's room, La Vallière, on opening one of the folds of the screen, found upon the floor a note in the king's handwriting. This note had been passed through the opening in the floor from the lower apartment to her own. No indiscreet hand or curious gaze was concerned in the bringing of this simple paper. This was one of Malicorne's ideas. Having seen how very serviceable De Saint-Aignan would become to the king on account of the situation of his apartment, he did not wish that the courtier should become still more indispensable as a messenger, and so he had, on his own private authority, reserved this last post for himself.

La Vallière most eagerly read the letter, which fixed two o'clock that same afternoon for the rendezvous, and which indicated the way of raising the trap-door in the flooring. "Make yourself look as beautiful as possible," added the postscript of the letter, — words which astonished the young girl, but at the same time reassured her.

The hours passed away very slowly, but the time fixed arrived at last. As punctual as the priestess Hero, Louise lifted up the trap-door at the last stroke of the hour of two, and found the king upon the upper steps, waiting for her with the greatest respect, in order to give her his hand to descend. This delicacy and deference affected her very powerfully. At the foot of the staircase the two lovers found the count, who with a smile and a low reverence distinguished by the best taste expressed his thanks to La Vallière for the honor she conferred upon him. Then, turning towards the king, he said, "Sire, our man is here."

La Vallière looked at the king with some uneasiness.

"Mademoiselle," said the king, "if I have begged you to do me the honor of coming down here, it was from an interested motive. I have procured a most admirable portrait-painter, who is celebrated for the fidelity of his likenesses, and I wish you to be kind enough to authorize him to paint yours. Besides, if you positively wish it, the portrait shall remain in your own possession."

La Vallière blushed.

"You see," said the king to her, "we shall not be three only; we shall be four. And so long as we are not alone, there can be as many present as you please."

La Vallière gently pressed her royal lover's hand.

"Let us pass into the next room, if your Majesty pleases," said De Saint-Aignan, opening the door to let his guests precede him.

The king walked behind La Vallière, fixing his eyes lingeringly and passionately upon her neck, as white as snow, upon which her long fair ringlets fell in heavy masses. La Vallière was dressed in a thick silk robe of pearl-gray color, with a tinge of rose, with jet ornaments, which displayed to greater effect the dazzling purity of her skin;

she held in her slender and transparent hands a bouquet of heartsease, Bengal roses, and clematis, surrounded with leaves of the tenderest green, above which uprose, like a tiny goblet shedding perfumes, a Haarlem tulip of gray and violet tints, of a pure and beautiful species, which had cost the gardener five years' toil in combinations and the king five thousand livres. Louis had placed this bouquet in La Vallière's hand as he saluted her.

In the room the door of which De Saint-Aignan had just opened, a young man with beautiful black eyes and long brown hair was standing, dressed in a loose velvet coat. It was the painter; his canvas was quite ready, and his palette prepared for use. He bowed to Mademoiselle de la Vallière with the grave curiosity of an artist who is studying his model, saluted the king discreetly, as if he did not recognize him, and as he would have saluted any other gentleman. Then, leading Mademoiselle de la Vallière to the seat which he had arranged for her, he begged her to sit down. The young girl assumed an attitude graceful and unconstrained, her hands occupied, and her limbs reclining on cushions; and in order that her gaze might not assume a vague or affected expression, the painter begged her to choose some kind of occupation, so as to engage her attention. Whereupon Louis XIV., smiling, sat down on the cushions at the feet of his mistress; so that she, in the reclining posture she had assumed, leaning back in the arm-chair, holding her flowers in her hand, and he, with his eyes raised towards hers and fixed devouringly on her face, together formed so charming a group that the artist contemplated it with professional delight, while on his side De Saint-Aignan regarded them with feelings of envy.

The painter sketched rapidly; and very soon beneath the touches of the brush there started into life, out of the

gray background, the gentle, poetry-breathing face, with its soft calm eyes and delicately tinted cheeks, framed in the fair hair. The lovers, however, spoke but little, and looked at each other a good deal; sometimes their eyes became so languishing in their gaze that the painter was obliged to interrupt his work in order to avoid representing an Erycina instead of a La Vallière. It was on such occasions that De Saint-Aignan came to the rescue, and recited verses, or repeated one of those little tales related by Patru and written so cleverly by Tallemant des Réaux. Sometimes La Vallière was fatigued, and a recess was taken; and immediately a tray of precious porcelain laden with the most beautiful fruits which could be obtained, and rich wines distilling their bright colors in chased silver, served as accessories to the picture, of which the painter could trace but the most ephemeral resemblance.

Louis was intoxicated with love, La Vallière with happiness, De Saint-Aignan with ambition; and the painter was storing up recollections for his old age. Two hours passed away in this manner; and four o'clock having struck, La Vallière rose and made a sign to the king. Louis also rose, approached the picture, and addressed a few flattering remarks to the artist. De Saint-Aignan extolled the picture, which, as he pretended, was already beginning to assume an accurate resemblance. La Vallière, in her turn, blushingly thanked the painter, and passed into the next room, where the king followed her after having previously summoned De Saint-Aignan.

"Will you not come to-morrow?" he said to La Vallière.

"Oh, Sire, pray consider that some one will be sure to come to my room, and will not find me there."

"Well!"

"What will become of me in that case?"

"You are very apprehensive, Louise."

"But suppose Madame were to send for me."

"Oh!" replied the king, "will the day never come when you yourself will tell me to brave everything, so that I may not have to leave you again?"

"On that day, then, Sire, I shall be quite out of my mind, and you ought not to believe me."

"To-morrow, Louise."

La Vallière sighed; but without the strength to oppose her royal lover's wish, she repeated, "To-morrow, then, since you desire it, Sire;" and with these words she ran up the stairs lightly, and disappeared from her lover's gaze.

"Well, Sire?" inquired De Saint-Aignan, when she had left.

"Well, De Saint-Aignan, yesterday I thought myself the happiest of men."

"And does your Majesty, then," said the count, smiling, "regard yourself to-day as the unhappiest of men?"

"No; but my love for her is an unquenchable thirst. In vain do I drink, in vain do I swallow the drops of water which your industry procures for me; the more I drink, the more I thirst."

"Sire, that is in some degree your own fault, and your Majesty alone has made the position such as it is."

"You are right."

"In that case, therefore, the means to be happy is to fancy yourself satisfied, and to wait."

"Wait! you know that word, then?"

"There, there, Sire, do not despair! I have already made endeavors in your behalf; I will still endeavor."

The king shook his head in a despairing manner.

"What, Sire! have you not been satisfied hitherto?"

"Oh, yes, indeed yes, my dear De Saint-Aignan; but find, for Heaven's sake, some further means yet."

"Sire, I undertake to do my best, and that is all I can do."

The king wished to see the portrait again, as he was unable to see the original. He suggested several alterations to the painter, and took his departure; and then De Saint-Aignan dismissed the artist. The easel, paints, and painter himself had scarcely gone, when Malicorne showed his head at the doorway. He was received by De Saint-Aignan with open arms, but still with a little sadness; for the cloud which had passed across the royal sun veiled, in its turn, the faithful satellite, and Malicorne at the first glance perceived the pall upon De Saint-Aignan's face.

"Oh, Monsieur the Count," he said, "how sad you look!"

"And good reason, too, my dear M. Malicorne. Will you believe that the king is not satisfied?"

"Not satisfied with his staircase?"

"Oh, no; on the contrary, he is delighted with the staircase."

"The decorations of the apartments, I suppose, are not according to his taste."

"Oh, he has not even thought of that! No, indeed; what has dissatisfied the king —"

"I will tell you, Monsieur the Count, — he is dissatisfied at finding himself the fourth person at a rendezvous of this kind. How is it possible, Monsieur the Count, that you could not have guessed that?"

"Why, how could I have guessed that, dear M. Malicorne, when I only followed the king's instructions to the very letter?"

"Did his Majesty really insist upon your being present?"

"Positively."

"And also required that the painter whom I met down as just now should be here too?"

"He insisted, M. Malicorne, — he insisted upon it."

"In that case I can easily understand why his Majesty is dissatisfied."

"What! dissatisfied that I have so punctually and literally obeyed his orders? I don't understand you."

Malicorne scratched his ear as he asked, "What time did the king fix for the rendezvous in your apartment?"

"Two o'clock."

"And you were waiting for the king, here?"

"Ever since half-past one; for it would have been a fine thing for me to have been unpunctual with his Majesty."

Malicorne, notwithstanding his respect for De Saint-Aignan, could not resist shrugging his shoulders. "And the painter," he said, — "did the king wish him to be here at two o'clock also?"

"No; but I had him waiting here from mid-day. Far better, you know, for a painter to be kept waiting a couple of hours than the king a single minute."

Malicorne began to laugh to himself. "Come, dear M. Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, "laugh less at me, and speak a little more freely, I beg."

"Well, then, Monsieur the Count, if you wish the king to be a little better satisfied the next time he comes — "

"*Ventre saint-gris!* as his grandfather used to say; I should say I did wish it!"

"Well, when the king comes to-morrow, go away on a most pressing matter of business, which cannot possibly be postponed, and stay away for twenty minutes."

"What! leave the king alone for twenty minutes?" cried De Saint-Aignan, in alarm.

"Very well, do as you like; don't pay any attention to what I say," said Malicorne, moving towards the door.

"Nay, nay, dear M. Malicorne; on the contrary, go on, — I begin to understand you. But the painter — "

"Oh! the painter must be half an hour late."

"Half an hour, — do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do, decidedly."

"Very well, then, I will do as you tell me."

"And my opinion is that you will find you are doing perfectly right. Will you allow me to come and make a few inquiries to-morrow?"

"Certainly."

"I have the honor to be your most respectful servant, M. de Saint-Aignan," said Malicorne, bowing himself out.

"There is no doubt that fellow has more wit than I have," said De Saint-Aignan, compelled by his conviction.

CHAPTER XLIV.

HAMPTON COURT.

The revelation which Montalais made to La Vallière, in a preceding chapter, of which we have been witnesses, very naturally suggests a return to the principal hero of this tale, — a poor wandering knight, roving about at the king's caprice. If our reader will be good enough to follow us, we will, as he did, cross that strait, more stormy than the Euripus, which separates Calais from Dover; we will speed across that green and fertile country, with its numerous little streams, round about Charing, Maidstone, and many other villages and towns, each more picturesque than the others, and finally arrive at London. Thence, like bloodhounds following a track, after having ascertained that Raoul had made his first stay at Whitehall, his second at St. James's, and having learned that he had been warmly received by Monk, and introduced into the best society of Charles II.'s court, we will follow him to one of Charles II.'s summer residences, near the town of Kingston, at Hampton Court, situated on the Thames.

This river is not yet, at that spot, the proud highway which bears upon its broad bosom its thousands of travellers every day, and whose waters are as black and troubled as those of Cocytus, as it boastfully asserts, "I, too, am the sea." No; at Hampton Court it is a soft and murmuring stream, with moss-grown banks, reflecting in its broad mirror the willows and beeches, on which may occasionally be seen a light boat lying unused among

the tall reeds, in a little bay bordered by alders and forget-me-nots. The surrounding country on all sides seemed smiling in happiness and wealth; the brick cottages, from whose chimneys the blue smoke was slowly ascending, peeped forth from the belts of green holly which environed them; children dressed in red frocks appeared and disappeared amid the high grass, like poppies bowed by the gentle breath of the passing breeze. The fat white sheep ruminated with closed eyes under the shade of the stunted aspens; while far and near the kingfisher, clad in emerald and gold, skimmed swiftly along the surface of the water like a magic ball, heedlessly touching, as he passed, the line of his brother angler, who sat watching in his boat the tench and the shad.

High above this paradise of dark shadows and soft light arose the palace of Hampton Court, built by Wolsey, and made magnificent for a king, — a residence which the haughty cardinal had been obliged, timid courtier that he was, to offer to his master, Henry VIII., who had frowned with envy and cupidity at his first view of the new palace. Hampton Court, with its brick walls, its large windows, its handsome iron gates, as well as its curious bell-turrets, its retired walks, and interior fountains, like those of the Alhambra, was a perfect bower of roses, jasmine, and clematis. It gave joy to every sense, of sight and smell particularly, and formed a most charming frame for the picture of love which Charles II. displayed among the voluptuous paintings of Titian, Pordenone, and Vandyck, — he who had in his gallery the portrait of Charles I., martyr king, and could show upon the wainscoting the holes made by the balls of the Puritan soldiers of Cromwell, on the 24th of August, 1648, at the time they had brought Charles I. prisoner to Hampton Court. There was that the king, ever intoxicated with pleasure and

amusement, held his court; being a poet in feeling, he thought himself justified in redeeming, by a whole day of voluptuousness, every minute which had been formerly passed in anguish and misery.

It was not the soft greensward of Hampton Court, — so soft that it almost gave the impression of velvet, — nor was it the beds of flowers, with their variegated hues, encircling the foot of every tree, with rose-trees many feet in height, which spread out their wealth of color like sheaves of fireworks, — nor even the enormous lime-trees, whose branches swept the earth like willows, offering a ready concealment for love or reflection beneath the shade of their foliage, — it was none of these things for which Charles II. loved his beautiful palace of Hampton Court. Perhaps it might have been that beautiful sheet of water, which the cool breeze rippled like the wavy undulations of Cleopatra's hair; waters bedecked with cresses and white water-lilies, with hardy bulbs, which half unfold themselves to disclose the golden-colored germs shining in their milk-white covering; murmuring waters, on the bosom of which the black swans majestically floated, and the restless water-fowl, with their tender broods covered with silken down, darted restlessly in every direction, in pursuit of the insects among the flags or the frogs in their mossy retreats. Perhaps it might have been the enormous hollies, with their varied foliage; or the tasteful bridges spanning the canals; or the fawns browsing in the endless avenues of the park; or the numberless birds which hopped and flew about the borders of box and clover.

It might well have been any of these charms, for Hampton Court possessed them all. There were, too, arbors of white roses, which climbed and trailed along the lofty trellises, showering down upon the ground their snowy and fragrant petals; in the park were ancient sycamores,

with mossy trunks, which buried their roots in that luxuriant mould, so rich in romance. But, no; what Charles II. most loved in Hampton Court was the charming figures who when mid-day was passed flitted to and fro along his terraces. Like Louis XIV., he had had their wealth of beauty painted for his gallery by one of the great artists of the period, — an artist who well knew the secret of transferring to canvas a ray of light which had escaped from their beaming eyes laden with love and love's delights.

The day of our arrival at Hampton Court is almost as clear and bright as a summer's day in France; the atmosphere is laden with the delicious perfume of the geraniums, sweet-peas, syringas, and heliotrope which are scattered around in profusion. It is past mid-day; and the king, having dined after his return from hunting, has paid a visit to Lady Castlemaine, the lady who was reputed at the time to be the mistress of his heart; and after this proof of his devotion, he is at leisure to indulge in infidelity to her until evening arrives. Love and amusement ruled the whole court. It was the period when ladies would seriously ask their cavaliers their opinion upon a foot more or less captivating, according to whether it wore a pink or a green silk stocking. It was the period when Charles II. had declared that there was no salvation for a woman without green silk stockings, because Miss Lucy Stewart wore them of that color.

While the king is endeavoring to inspire others with his preferences on this point, we will ourselves bend our steps towards an avenue of beech-trees opposite the terrace, and listen to the conversation of a young girl in a dark-colored dress, who is walking with another of about her own age dressed in lilac and dark blue. They crossed the [illegible], in the middle of which arose a beautiful fountain,

with figures of sirens executed in bronze; and, talking as they went, walked along the terrace, from which many brick-paved walks led at intervals to summer-houses in the park, various in form and ornaments. These summer-houses were nearly all occupied; and so the two young women passed on, the one blushing deeply, while the other seemed dreamingly silent. At last, having reached the end of the terrace which looks on the river, and finding there a cool retreat, they sat down close to each other.

"Where are we going, Stewart?" said the younger of the two ladies to her companion.

"My dear Grafton, we are going, you perceive, where you yourself led the way."

"I?"

"Yes, you, — to the extremity of the palace, towards that seat yonder, where the young Frenchman is sitting and sighing."

Miss Mary Grafton stopped short, and said, "No, no; I am not going there."

"Why not?"

"Let us go back, Stewart."

"Nay, on the contrary, let us go on and have an explanation."

"About what?"

"About how it happens that the Vicomte de Bragelonne always accompanies you in all your walks, as you invariably accompany him in his."

"And you conclude either that he loves me or that I love him?"

"Why not? He is a most agreeable gentleman. No one hears me, I hope," said Miss Lucy Stewart, as she turned round with a smile, which indicated, moreover, that her uneasiness on the subject was not extreme.

"No, no," said Mary; "the king is in his oval summer-house with the Duke of Buckingham."

"Oh! speaking of the duke, Mary, it seems he has constituted himself your knight since his return from France; how is your own heart in that direction?"

Mary Grafton shrugged her shoulders with seeming indifference.

"Well, well, I will ask the handsome Bragelonne about that," said Stewart, laughing; "let us go and find him at once."

"What for?"

"I wish to speak to him."

"Not yet; one word before you do. Come, Stewart, you who know so many of the king's little secrets, tell me why is M. de Bragelonne in England, and what is he doing here?"

"What every gentleman does who is sent as an envoy from his sovereign to another."

"That may be; but, seriously, although politics are not our forte, we know enough to be satisfied that M. de Bragelonne has no mission of any serious import here."

"Well, then, listen," said Stewart, with assumed gravity; "for your sake I am going to betray a State secret. Shall I tell you the nature of the letter which King Louis XIV. gave M. de Bragelonne for King Charles II.? I will; here it is: —

"'My Brother, — The bearer of this is a gentleman attached to my court, and the son of one whom you regard most warmly. Treat him kindly, I beg, and try to make him like England.'"

"Did it say that?"

"Word for word, — or something very like it. I will not answer for the form, but the substance I am sure of."

"Well, and what conclusion do you, or rather what conclusion does the king, draw from that?"

"That the King of France has his own reasons for removing M. de Bragelonne, and for getting him married — somewhere else than in France."

"So that in consequence of this letter — "

"King Charles received M. de Bragelonne, as you are aware, in the most distinguished and friendly manner; the handsomest apartments in Whitehall were allotted to him; and as you are the most precious person in his court, inasmuch as you have rejected his heart, — nay, do not blush, — he wished you to take a fancy to this Frenchman, and he was desirous to confer upon him so valuable a prize. And this is the reason why you, the heiress of three hundred thousand pounds, a future duchess, and one so beautiful and so good, have been thrown in M. de Bragelonne's way in all the promenades and parties of pleasure to which he was invited. In fact, it was a plot, a kind of conspiracy. If you wish to further it, I will aid you."

Miss Mary smiled with that charming expression which was habitual to her, and pressing her companion's arm, said, "Thank the king, Lucy."

"Yes, yes; but the Duke of Buckingham is jealous, so take care!"

Hardly had she pronounced these words, when the duke appeared from one of the pavilions on the terrace, and approaching the two girls with a smile said: "You are mistaken, Miss Lucy. I am not jealous; and the proof, Miss Mary, is yonder, — in the person of the Vicomte de Bragelonne himself, who ought to be the cause of my jealousy, but who is dreaming in pensive solitude. Poor fellow! Allow me to surrender to him your delightful society for a few minutes, while I avail myself of those few

minutes to converse with Miss Lucy Stewart, to whom I have something to say." And then, bowing to Lucy, he said, "Will you do me the honor to accept my hand, in order that I may lead you to the king, who is waiting for us?" With these words Buckingham, still smiling, took Miss Stewart's hand and led her away.

When by herself, Mary Grafton, her head gently inclined towards her shoulder with that indolent grace which distinguishes young English girls, remained for a moment with her eyes fixed on Raoul, but as if uncertain what to do. At last, after first blushing violently and then turning deadly pale, thus revealing the internal combat which agitated her heart, she seemed to make up her mind, and with a tolerably firm step advanced towards the seat on which Raoul was sitting, buried in the profoundest meditation, as we have already said. The sound of Miss Mary's steps, light as they were, upon the greensward aroused Raoul; he turned his head, perceived the young girl, and walked forward to meet the companion whom his happy destiny had thrown in his way.

"I have been sent to you, Monsieur," said Mary Grafton; "will you accept me?"

"To whom is my gratitude due for so great a happiness?" replied Raoul.

"To the Duke of Buckingham," replied Mary, affecting a gayety which she did not really feel.

"To the Duke of Buckingham, to him who so passionately seeks your charming society! Am I really to believe that you are serious, Mademoiselle?"

"The fact is, Monsieur, you perceive, that everything seems to conspire to make us pass the best, or rather the longest, part of our days together. Yesterday it was the king who desired me to beg you to seat yourself next at dinner; to-day it is the Duke of Buckingham

himself who begs me to come and seat myself near you on this bench."

"And he has gone away in order to leave us together?" asked Raoul, with some embarrassment.

"Look yonder, at the turning of that path; he is just going out of sight with Miss Stewart. Are these polite attentions usual in France, Monsieur the Viscount?"

"I cannot very precisely say what people do in France, Mademoiselle, for I can hardly be called a Frenchman. I have resided in many countries, and almost always as a soldier; and then I have spent a long period of my life in the country. I am almost a savage."

"You are not contented in England, I fear."

"I scarcely know," said Raoul, inattentively, and sighing deeply at the same time.

"What! you do not know?"

"Forgive me," said Raoul, shaking his head and collecting his thoughts, "I did not understand you."

"Oh," said the young girl, sighing in her turn, "how wrong the Duke of Buckingham was to send me here!"

"Wrong!" said Raoul, quickly. "You are right; for I am but a rude, uncouth companion, and my society annoys you. The duke was, indeed, very wrong to send you."

"It is precisely," replied the young lady, in a clear, calm voice, "because your society does not annoy me, that the duke was wrong to send me to you."

It was now Raoul's turn to blush. "But," he resumed, "how happens it that the Duke of Buckingham should send you to me, and why should you have come? The duke loves you, and you love him."

"No," replied Mary, seriously, "the duke does not love me, because he is in love with Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans; and as for myself, I have no affection for the duke."

Raoul looked at the young girl with astonishment.

"Are you a friend of the Duke of Buckingham, Viscount?" she inquired.

"The duke has honored me by calling me so ever since we met in France."

"You are simple acquaintances, then?"

"No; for the duke is the most intimate friend of one whom I regard as a brother."

"M. le Comte de Guiche?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"Who is in love with Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans?"

"Oh! what is that you are saying?"

"And who loves him in return," continued the young girl, quietly.

Raoul bent down his head; and Miss Mary Grafton, sighing deeply, continued: "They are very happy. But leave me, M. de Bragelonne; for the Duke of Buckingham has given you a very troublesome commission in offering me as a companion in your promenade. Your heart is elsewhere, and it is with the greatest difficulty you can be charitable enough to lend me your attention. Confess truly; it would be unfair on your part, Viscount, not to confess it."

"Madame, I do confess it."

She looked at him steadily. He was so noble and so handsome in his bearing, his clear eye revealed so much gentleness, candor, and resolution, that the idea could not possibly enter the mind of a lady so accomplished as Miss Mary, that he was either rudely discourteous or a mere simpleton. She only perceived that he loved another woman, and not herself, with the whole strength of his heart. "Ah! I now understand you," she said; "you have left your heart behind you in France." Raoul bowed. "The duke is aware of your affection?"

"No one knows it," replied Raoul.

"Why, therefore, do you tell me? Nay, answer me."

"I cannot."

"It is for me, then, to anticipate an explanation. You do not wish to tell me anything, because you are now convinced that I do not love the duke; because you see that I possibly might have loved you; because you are a gentleman of noble and delicate sentiments; and because, instead of accepting, even were it for the mere amusement of the passing hour, a hand which was almost pressed upon you, and instead of meeting my smiles with a smiling lip, you, who are young, have preferred to tell me, whom men have called beautiful, 'My heart is far away in France.' For this I thank you, M. de Bragelonne; you are indeed a noble-hearted, noble-minded man, and I regard you yet more for it, — as a friend. And now let us cease speaking of myself, and talk of your own affairs. Forget that I have ever spoken to you of myself; tell me why you are sad, and why you have become more than usually so during the last few days."

Raoul was deeply and sensibly moved by her sweet and melancholy tone; and as he could not at the moment find a word to say, the young girl again came to his assistance.

"Pity me," she said. "My mother was born in France, and I can therefore affirm that I too am French in blood as well as in feeling; but the heavy atmosphere and characteristic gloom of England seem to weigh like a burden upon me. Sometimes my dreams are golden-hued and full of wondrous enjoyment; but suddenly a mist arises and overspreads my dreams and blots them out forever. Such, indeed, is the case at the present moment. Forgive me, I have now said enough on that subject; give me your hand, and relate your griefs to me as to a friend."

"You say you are French in blood and in feeling?"

"Yes; not only, I repeat, was my mother French, but,

further still, as my father, a friend of King Charles I., was exiled in France, I, during the trial of that prince as well as during the Protector's life, was brought up in Paris; at the Restoration of King Charles II. my poor father returned to England, where he died almost immediately afterwards; and then King Charles created me a duchess, and has dowered me according to my rank."

"Have you still any relatives in France?" Raoul inquired with the deepest interest.

"I have a sister there, my senior by seven or eight years, who was married in France, and was early left a widow; her name is Madame de Bellière. Do you know her?" she added, observing Raoul start suddenly.

"I have heard her name mentioned."

"She, too, is in love; and her last letters inform me that she is happy, and her affection is, I conclude, returned. I have told you, M. de Bragelonne, that I share her nature; but I do not share her happiness. But let us now speak of yourself; whom do you love in France?"

"A young girl, as soft and as pure as a lily."

"But if she loves you, why are you sad?"

"I have been told that she has ceased to love me."

"You do not believe it, I trust?"

"He who wrote me so does not sign his letter."

"An anonymous denunciation! some treachery, be assured!" said Miss Grafton.

"Stay!" said Raoul, showing the young girl a letter which he had read a hundred times. She took it from his hand, and read as follows: —

"Viscount, — You are perfectly right to amuse yourself yonder with the lovely faces of Charles II.'s court, for at Louis XIV.'s court the castle in which your affections are enshrined is besieged. Stay in London altogether, poor Viscount, or return without delay to Paris."

"There is no signature," said Miss Mary.

"None."

"Believe it not, then."

"Very good; but here is a second letter, from M. de Guiche, which says, —

"'My Friend, — I am lying here wounded and ill. Return, Raoul, oh, return!'"

"What do you intend to do?" inquired the young girl, with a feeling of oppression at her heart.

"My intention, as soon as I received this letter, was immediately to take my leave of the king."

"When did you receive it?"

"The day before yesterday."

"It is dated from Fontainebleau."

"A singular circumstance, is it not? — for the court is now at Paris. At all events, I would have set off; but when I mentioned my departure to the king, he began to laugh, and said to me: 'How comes it, Monsieur the Ambassador, that you think of leaving? Has your sovereign recalled you?' I colored, naturally enough, for I was confused by the question; for the fact is, the king himself sent me here, and I have received no order to return."

Mary frowned in deep thought, and said, "Do you remain, then?"

"I must, Mademoiselle."

"And does the one whom you love write to you?"

"Never."

"Never, do you say? Does she not love you, then?"

"At least, she has not written to me since my departure, although she used occasionally to write to me before. I trust that she may have been prevented."

"Hush! the duke is here."

Buckingham at that moment was seen at the end of the

walk, approaching towards them, alone and smiling; he advanced slowly, and held out his hands to them both.

"Have you arrived at an understanding?" he said.

"About what?"

"About whatever might render you happy, dear Mary, and make Raoul less miserable."

"I do not understand you, my Lord," said Raoul.

"That is, my view of the subject, Miss Mary; do you wish me to mention it before M. de Bragelonne?" he said with a smile.

"If you mean," replied the young girl, haughtily, "that I was not indisposed to love M. de Bragelonne, that is useless, for I have told him so myself."

Buckingham reflected for a moment, and without seeming in any way discountenanced, as she expected, he said: "My reason for leaving you with M. de Bragelonne was that I thoroughly knew your refined delicacy of feeling, no less than the perfect loyalty of your mind and heart, and I hoped that M. de Bragelonne's wounded heart might be cured by the hands of such a physician."

"But, my Lord, before you spoke of M. de Bragelonne's heart, you spoke to me of your own. Do you mean me to effect the cure of two hearts at the same time?"

"Perfectly true, Miss Mary; but you will do me the justice to admit that I have long discontinued a useless pursuit, acknowledging that my own wound is incurable."

"My Lord," said Mary, collecting herself for a moment before she spoke, "M. de Bragelonne is happy, for he loves and is beloved. He has no need of such a physician as I."

"M. de Bragelonne," said Buckingham, "is on the very eve of experiencing a serious misfortune, and he has greater need than ever of sympathy and affection."

"Explain yourself, my Lord," inquired Raoul, anxiously.

"No. Gradually I will explain myself; but if you de-

sire it, I can tell Miss Mary what you may not listen to yourself."

"My Lord, you are putting me to the torture; you know something that you wish to conceal from me?"

"I know that Miss Mary Grafton is the most charming object that a heart ill at ease could possibly meet with in its way through life."

"My Lord, I have already told you that the Vicomte de Bragelonne loves elsewhere," said the young girl.

"He is wrong, then."

"Do you assume then to know, my Lord, that I am wrong?"

"Yes."

"But who is it that he loves, then?" exclaimed the young girl.

"He loves a woman who is unworthy of him," said Buckingham, with that calm, collected manner of which an Englishman is alone capable.

Miss Mary Grafton uttered a cry, which together with the remark that Buckingham had that moment made spread over De Bragelonne's features a deadly paleness, arising from the sudden shock and also from a vague fear of impending misfortune. "My Lord," he exclaimed, "you have just pronounced words which without a moment's delay I go to seek an explanation of at Paris."

"You will remain here," said Buckingham, "because you have no right to leave; and no one has the right to quit the service of the king for that of any woman, even were she as worthy of being loved as Mary Grafton is."

"You will tell me all, then?"

"I will, on condition that you will remain."

"I will remain, if you will promise to speak openly and without reserve."

Thus far had their conversation proceeded, and Buck-

ingham in all probability was on the point of revealing, not indeed all that had taken place, but at least all that he was aware of, when one of the king's attendants appeared at the end of the terrace, and advanced towards the summer-house where the king was sitting with Miss Lucy Stewart. A courier followed him, covered with dust from head to foot, who seemed as if he had but a few moments before dismounted from his horse.

"The courier from France! Madame's courier!" exclaimed Raoul, recognizing the princess's livery; and while the attendant and the courier advanced towards the king, the duke and Miss Grafton exchanged a look full of intelligence with each other.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE COURIER FROM MADAME.

CHARLES II. was busily engaged in proving, or in endeavoring to prove, to Miss Stewart that she was the only person for whom he cared at all, and consequently he was swearing for her an affection similar to that which his ancestor Henry IV. had entertained for Gabrielle. Unfortunately for Charles II. he had hit upon an unlucky day, — upon a day when Miss Stewart had taken it into her head to make him jealous; and therefore, instead of being touched by his offer, as the king had hoped, she laughed heartily. "Oh, Sire, Sire," she cried, laughing all the while, "if I were to be unfortunate enough to ask you for a proof of the affection you profess, how easy it would be to see that you are telling a falsehood!"

"Nay, listen to me!" said Charles. "You know my cartoons by Raphael; you know whether I care for them or not; the whole world envies me their possession, as you well know also; my father got Vandyck to purchase them. Would you like me to send them to your house this very day?"

"Oh, no!" replied the young girl. "Pray keep them yourself, Sire; my house is far too small to accommodate such visitors."

"In that case you shall have Hampton Court to put the cartoons in."

"Be less generous, Sire, and make your love more lasting; that is all I have to ask you."

"I shall never cease to love you; is not that enough?"

"You are laughing, Sire."

"Do you wish me to weep, then?"

"No; but I should like to see you a little more melancholy."

"Thank Heaven, my dear, I have been so long enough, — fourteen years of exile, poverty, and misery. I think I may regard it as a debt discharged; besides, melancholy makes people look so plain."

"Far from that; for look at the young Frenchman!"

"What! the Vicomte de Bragelonne! Are you smitten too? By Heaven, they will all become mad about him, one after the other; but he, on the contrary, has a reason for being melancholy."

"Why so?"

"Oh, indeed! you wish me to betray State secrets to you?"

"If I wish it, you must do it, since you told me you were quite ready to do everything I wished."

"Well, then, he is bored in his own country. Does that satisfy you?"

"Bored?"

"Yes, — a proof that he is a simpleton, do you understand? I allow him to fall in love with Miss Mary Grafton, and he feels bored!"

"Very good; it seems, then, that if you were to find Miss Lucy Stewart indifferent to you, you would readily console yourself by falling in love with Miss Mary Grafton."

"I don't say that. In the first place, you know that Mary Grafton does not care for me; besides, a man can only console himself for a lost affection by the discovery of a new one. Again, however, I repeat, the question is not of myself, but of that young man. One might almost

be tempted to call the girl he has left behind him a Helen, — a Helen before her introduction to Paris, of course."

"He has left some one, then?"

"That is to say, some one has left him."

"Poor fellow! so much the worse!"

"What do you mean by 'so much the worse'?"

"Why not? Why did he leave?"

"Do you think it was of his own will that he left?"

"Was he obliged to leave, then?"

"He left Paris under orders, my dear Stewart; and — prepare to be surprised — by express orders of the king."

"Ah! I begin to see now."

"At least say nothing at all about it."

"You know very well that I am quite as discreet as any man could be. And so the king sent him away?"

"Yes."

"And during his absence he takes his mistress away from him?"

"Yes; and will you believe it, the silly fellow, instead of thanking the king, is making himself miserable!"

"What! thank the king for depriving him of the woman he loves! Really, Sire, yours is a most ungallant speech."

"But, pray understand me! If she whom the king had run off with were a Miss Grafton or a Miss Stewart, I should be of his opinion; nay, I should even think him not half miserable enough; but she is a little, thin, lame thing. Deuce take such fidelity as that! Surely, one can hardly understand how a man can refuse a girl who is rich for one who is poor, a girl who loves him for one who deceives and betrays him."

"Do you think that Mary seriously wishes to please the viscount, Sire?"

"I do, indeed."

"Very good! the viscount will settle down in England; for Mary has a clear head, and when she fixes her mind upon anything, she does so thoroughly."

"Take care, my dear Miss Stewart! If the viscount has any idea of adopting our country, he has not entertained it long, for it was only the day before yesterday that he came to ask permission to leave."

"Which you refused him, I suppose?"

"I should think so, indeed. My royal brother is far too anxious for his absence; and for myself, my *amour propre* is enlisted on his side, for I will never have it said that I had held out as a bait to this young man the noblest and gentlest creature in England —"

"You are very gallant, Sire," said Miss Stewart, with a pretty pout.

"I do not allude to Miss Stewart," said the king; "for she is a bait for royalty, and since she has captivated me, I trust that no one else will be caught by her. I say, then, in short, that the attention I have shown this young man will not have been thrown away; he will stay with us here, will marry here, or I am very much mistaken."

"And I hope that when he is once married and settled, instead of being angry with your Majesty, he will be grateful to you. For every one tries his utmost to please him; even the Duke of Buckingham, which is hardly credible, keeps in the background in his presence."

"And including Miss Stewart, even, who calls him a most finished gentleman."

"Stay, Sire! You have extolled Miss Grafton quite enough; let me now talk a little of De Bragelonne. But, by the by, Sire, your kindness for some time past astonishes me; you think of those who are absent, you forgive those who have done wrong, — in fact, you are as nearly perfect as possible. How does it happen —"

"It is because you allow yourself to be loved," he said, beginning to laugh.

"Oh, there must be some other reason!"

"Well, I am obliging my brother Louis XIV."

"Nay, I must have another reason."

"Well, then, the true motive is that Buckingham strongly recommended the young man to me, saying, 'Sire, I begin by yielding up, in favor of the Vicomte de Bragelonne, all claim to Miss Grafton; I pray you, follow my example.'"

"The duke is, indeed, a true gentleman."

"Oh, of course, of course! It is Buckingham's turn now, I suppose, to turn your head. You seem determined to cross me in everything to-day."

At this moment some one tapped at the door.

"Who is it that presumes to interrupt us?" exclaimed Charles, impatiently.

"Really, Sire, you are extremely vain with your 'Who is it that presumes?' and in order to punish you for it —"

She went to the door herself and opened it.

"Ah! it is a courier from France," said Miss Stewart.

"A courier from France!" exclaimed Charles; "from my sister, perhaps?"

"Yes, Sire," said the usher, — "a special messenger."

"Let him come in at once," said Charles.

"You have a letter for me," said the king to the courier as he entered, "from Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans?"

"Yes, Sire," replied the courier; "and so urgent is its nature that I have been only twenty-six hours bringing it to your Majesty, and yet I lost three quarters of an hour at Calais."

"Your zeal shall not be forgotten," said the king, as he opened the letter. When he had read it, he burst out

laughing and exclaimed, "Upon my word, I don't understand anything about it." He then read the letter a second time, Miss Stewart assuming a manner marked by the greatest reserve, and doing her utmost to restrain her ardent curiosity.

"Francis," said the king to his valet, "see that this excellent fellow has proper refreshment and sleeps soundly, and that on waking to-morrow morning he finds a purse of fifty sovereigns by his bedside."

"Sire!" said the courier, amazed.

"Begone, begone! My sister was perfectly right in desiring you to use the utmost diligence; the affair was most pressing;" and he again began to laugh louder than ever. The courier, the valet, and Miss Stewart herself hardly knew what sort of countenance to assume. "Ah!" said the king, throwing himself back in his arm-chair, "when I think that you have ruined how many horses —"

"Two!"

"Two horses to bring this intelligence to me! That will do; you can leave us now."

The courier retired with the valet. Charles went to the window, which he opened, and leaning forward called out, "Duke! Duke of Buckingham! my dear Buckingham, come here!"

The duke hurried to him in obedience to the summons; but when he reached the door and perceived Miss Stewart, he hesitated to enter.

"Come in, and shut the door, Duke!" said the king. The duke obeyed, and perceiving in what an excellent humor the king was, he advanced smilingly towards him. "Well, my dear duke, how do you get on with your Frenchman?"

"Sire, I am in the most utter despair about him."

"Why so?"

"Because charming Miss Grafton is willing to marry him, but he is unwilling."

"Why, this Frenchman is a perfect Bœotian!" cried Miss Stewart. "Let him say either 'Yes' or 'No,' and let the affair end."

"But," said Buckingham, seriously, "you know, or you ought to know, Madame, that M. de Bragelonne is in love in another direction."

"In that case," said the king, coming to the help of Miss Stewart, "nothing is easier; let him say 'No,' then."

"Oh, but I have proved to him that he was wrong not to say 'Yes.'"

"Did you tell him candidly that La Vallière was deceiving him?"

"Yes, without the slightest reserve; and as soon as I had done so he gave a start, as if he were going to clear the Channel at a bound."

"At all events," said Miss Stewart, "he has done something, and that is really very fortunate."

"But," continued Buckingham, "I stopped him. I have left him and Miss Mary in conversation together; and I sincerely trust that now he will not leave, as he seemed to have an idea of doing."

"An idea of leaving England!" exclaimed the king.

"I at one moment hardly thought that any human power was capable of preventing him; but Miss Mary's eyes are now bent fully on him, and he will remain."

"Well, that is the very thing in which you are mistaken, Buckingham," said the king, with a peal of laughter; "the poor fellow is predestined."

"Predestined to what?"

"If it were to be simply deceived, that is nothing; still, to look at him, it is a great deal."

"At a distance, and with Miss Grafton's aid, the blow will be warded off."

"Far from it, far from it! he will have the aid neither of distance nor of Miss Grafton. Bragelonne will set off for Paris in an hour."

Buckingham started, and Miss Stewart opened her eyes very wide in astonishment.

"But, Sire," said the duke, "your Majesty knows that it is impossible."

"That is to say, my dear Buckingham, that it is impossible until it happens."

"Do not forget, Sire, that the young man is a perfect lion, and that his wrath is terrible."

"I don't deny it, my dear Villiers."

"If he sees his misfortune so near, so much the worse for the author of it."

"I don't deny it; but what do you expect me to do?"

"Were it the king himself," cried Buckingham, "I would not answer for him."

"Oh, the king has his Musketeers to take care of him," said Charles, quietly; "I know that perfectly well, for I was kept dancing attendance in his antechamber at Blois. He has M. d'Artagnan, — there is a guardian for you! I should make myself perfectly easy with twenty storms of passion like those of your Bragelonne, if I had four guardians like M. d'Artagnan."

"But I entreat your Majesty, who is so good and kind, to reflect a little," said Buckingham.

"Stay!" said Charles II., presenting the letter to the duke; "read, and answer yourself what you would do in my place."

Buckingham slowly took Madame's letter, and trembling with emotion read the following words: —

For your own sake, for mine, for the honor and safety of every one, send M. de Bragelonne back to France immediately.

Your devoted sister, HENRIETTA.

"Well, Villiers, what do you say?"

"Upon my word, Sire, I have nothing to say," replied the duke, amazed.

"Nay, would you, of all persons," said the king, artfully, "advise me not to listen to my sister when she writes so urgently?"

"Oh, no, no, Sire! and yet —"

"You 've not read the postscript, Villiers; it is under the fold of the letter, and escaped my own eye at first. Read it." And as the duke turned down a fold of the letter, he read, —

"A thousand kind remembrances to those who love me."

The duke's head sank gradually on his breast; the paper trembled in his fingers, as if it had been changed to lead. The king paused for a moment, and seeing that Buckingham did not speak, "He must follow his destiny, as we ours," continued the king. "Every man has his share of suffering in this world; I have had my own, I have had that of others who belong to me, and have thus borne a double cross. But the deuce take all my cares now! Go and bring the gentleman here, Villiers."

The duke opened the trellised door of the summer-house, and pointing to Raoul and Mary, who were walking together side by side, said, "What a cruel blow, Sire, for poor Miss Grafton!"

"Nonsense! call him!" said Charles II., knitting his black brows together. "Every one seems to be sentimental

here. There, look at Miss Stewart, who is wiping her eyes; now deuce take the French fellow!"

The duke called to Raoul; and taking Miss Grafton by the hand, he led her to the king.

"M. de Bragelonne," said Charles II., "did you not ask me the day before yesterday for permission to return to Paris?"

"Yes, Sire," replied Raoul, greatly puzzled by this opening.

"Well, my dear viscount, I refused you, I think?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Were you not angry with me for it?"

"No, Sire; your Majesty had no doubt excellent reasons for withholding it, for you are so wise and so good that everything you do is well done."

"I alleged as a reason, I believe, that the King of France had not recalled you?"

"Yes, Sire, that was the reason you assigned."

"Well, M. de Bragelonne, I have considered the matter since. If the king did not in fact fix your return, he begged me to render your sojourn in England as agreeable as possible; since, however, you ask my permission to return, it is because your residence in England is no longer agreeable to you."

"I do not say that, Sire."

"No; but your request, at least," said the king, "signified that another place of residence would be more agreeable to you than this."

At this moment Raoul turned towards the door, against the frame of which Miss Grafton was leaning, pale and sorrow-stricken; her other arm was passed through the arm of the duke.

"You do not reply," pursued Charles; "the French proverb is pertinent, — 'Who does not speak, consents.'

Very good, M. de Bragelonne, I am now in a position to satisfy you; whenever you please, therefore, you may leave for France. I authorize it."

"Sire!" exclaimed Raoul; while Mary stifled an exclamation of grief which rose to her lips, unconsciously pressing Buckingham's arm.

"You can be at Dover this evening," continued the king; "the tide serves at two o'clock in the morning."

Raoul, astounded, stammered a few words, which equally answered the purpose both of thanks and of excuse.

"I therefore bid you adieu, M. de Bragelonne, and wish you every sort of prosperity," said the king, rising. "You will confer a pleasure on me by keeping this diamond in remembrance of me; I had intended it as a marriage gift."

Miss Grafton seemed ready to faint; and as Raoul received the diamond from the king's hand, he too felt his strength and courage failing him. He addressed a few respectful words to the king, a passing compliment to Miss Stewart, and looked for Buckingham to bid him adieu. The king profited by this moment to disappear. Raoul found the duke engaged in endeavoring to encourage Miss Grafton.

"Tell him to remain, I implore you!" said Buckingham to Mary.

"No; I will tell him to go," replied Miss Grafton, with returning animation. "I am not one of those women who have more pride than heart. If she whom he loves is in France let him return there, and bless me for having advised him to go thither and seek his happiness. If, on the contrary, she shall have ceased to love him, let him come back here again. I shall still love him, and his unhappiness will not have lessened him in my regard. In the arms of my house you will find that which Heaven has

engraven on my heart: *Habenti parum, egenti cuncta,* — 'To the rich is accorded little, to the poor everything.'"

"I do not believe, friend," said Buckingham, "that you will find yonder the equivalent of what you leave behind you here."

"I think, or at least I hope," said Raoul, with a gloomy air, "that she whom I love is worthy of my affection; but if it be true that she is unworthy of me, as you have endeavored to make me believe, I will tear her image from my heart, Duke, even though my heart be broken in the attempt."

Mary Grafton lifted her eyes to him with an expression of ineffable compassion; and Raoul smiled sadly, saying, "Mademoiselle, the diamond which the king has given me was destined for you. Give me leave to offer it for your acceptance. If I marry in France, you will send it back to me; if I do not marry, keep it;" and he bowed and left her.

"What does he mean?" thought Buckingham, while Raoul pressed Miss Mary's icy hand with marked respect.

Mary understood the look that Buckingham fixed upon her. "If it were a wedding-ring, I would not accept it," she said.

"And yet you were willing to ask him to return to you."

"Oh, Duke," cried the young girl, in heart-broken accents, "a woman such as I am is never accepted as a consolation by a man like him."

"You do not think he will return, then?"

"Never," said Miss Grafton, in a choking voice.

"And I grieve to tell you, Mary, that he will find yonder his happiness destroyed, his mistress lost to him, even his honor impaired. What will be left him, then, equal

to your affection? Do you answer, Mary, — you who know yourself so well."

Miss Grafton placed her white hand on Buckingham's arm; and while Raoul was hurrying away with headlong speed down the avenue of lindens, she repeated in dying accents the line from "Romeo and Juliet," —

"I must be gone and live, or stay and die."

As she finished the last word, Raoul had disappeared. Miss Grafton returned to her own apartment, paler and more silent than death itself. Buckingham availed himself of the arrival of the courier who had brought the letter to the king, to write to Madame and to the Comte de Guiche. The king had not been mistaken; for at two in the morning the tide was at full flood, and Raoul had embarked for France.

CHAPTER XLVI.

DE SAINT-AIGNAN FOLLOWS MALICORNE'S ADVICE.

The king followed the progress of La Vallière's portrait with a care and attention arising as much from a desire that it should resemble her as from the wish that the painting of it might be long continued. It was amusing to observe him following the artist's brush, awaiting the completion of a particular plan or the result of a combination of colors, and suggesting various modifications to the painter, which the latter consented to adopt with the most respectful docility. And again when the artist, following Malicorne's advice, was a little late in arriving, and when De Saint-Aignan had been obliged to be absent for a short time, it was interesting to observe, though no one witnessed them, those moments of silence full of deep expression, which united in one sigh two souls most disposed to understand each other, and most desirous of this calm and meditation. Then the minutes flew by as if on wings; and as the king drew closer to Louise and bent his burning gaze upon her, a noise was suddenly heard in the anteroom. It was the artist, who had just arrived; De Saint-Aignan, too, had returned full of apologies; and the king began to talk, and La Vallière to answer him very hurriedly, their eyes revealing to De Saint-Aignan that they had enjoyed a century of happiness during his absence. In a word, Malicorne, a philosopher without knowing it, had learned how to inspire the king with an appetite in

the midst of plenty, and with desire in the assurance of possession.

La Vallière's fears of interruption had never been realized, and no one imagined that she was absent from her apartment two or three hours every day. She pretended that her health was very uncertain. Those who went to her room always knocked before entering; and Malicorne, the man of so many ingenious inventions, had constructed an acoustic piece of mechanism, by means of which La Vallière when in De Saint-Aignan's apartment was always forewarned of any visits which were paid to the room she usually inhabited. In this manner, therefore, without going outside, and having no confidante, she was able to return to her apartment, thus removing by her appearance, a little tardy perhaps but no less effectual, the suspicions of the most determined sceptics. Malicorne having asked De Saint-Aignan the next morning what news he had to report, the latter had been obliged to confess that the quarter of an hour's liberty had put the king in most excellent humor. "We must double the dose," replied Malicorne, "but imperceptibly so; wait until they seem to wish it."

They were so desirous for it, however, that on the evening of the fourth day, at the moment when the painter was packing up his painting implements during De Saint-Aignan's continued absence, De Saint-Aignan entered, and noticed upon La Vallière's face a shade of disappointment and vexation which she could not conceal. The king was less reserved, and exhibited his annoyance by a very significant shrug of the shoulders, at which La Vallière could not help blushing. "Very good!" thought De Saint-Aignan to himself; "M. Malicorne will be delighted this evening," — as he in fact was, when it was reported to him.

"It is very evident," Malicorne remarked to the count, "that Mademoiselle de la Vallière hoped that you would be at least ten minutes later."

"And the king that I should be half an hour later, dear M. Malicorne."

"You will be but very indifferently devoted to the king," replied the latter, "if you were to refuse his Majesty that half-hour's satisfaction."

"But the painter?" objected De Saint-Aignan.

"I will take care of him," said Malicorne; "only I must study faces and circumstances a little before I act. Those are my magical operations; and while sorcerers are enabled by means of the astrolabe to take the altitude of the sun, moon, and stars, I am satisfied merely by looking into people's faces, in order to see if their eyes are encircled with dark lines and if the mouth describes a convex or a concave arc."

"But be careful!"

"Have no fear."

And the cunning Malicorne had every opportunity of watching narrowly and closely; for the very same evening the king accompanied the queens to Madame's apartments, and made himself so remarked by his serious face and his deep sighs, and looked at La Vallière with such a languishing expression, that Malicorne said to Montalais during the evening, "To-morrow;" and he went off to the painter's house in the Rue des Jardins-St.-Paul to beg him to postpone the next sitting for a couple of days.

De Saint-Aignan was not within when La Vallière, who was now quite familiar with the lower story, lifted up the trap-door and descended. The king, as usual, was waiting for her on the staircase, and held a bouquet in his hand; as soon as he saw her, he clasped her tenderly in

his arms. La Vallière, much moved at the action, looked around the room; but when she saw that the king was alone, she did not complain of it. They sat down. The king, reclining near the cushions on which Louise was seated, with his head supported by her knees, placed there as in an asylum whence no one could banish him, gazed ardently upon her; and as if the moment had arrived when nothing could interpose between their two hearts, she too gazed with similar passion upon him, and from her eyes, so soft and pure, there emanated a flame whose rays went straight to her royal lover's heart, to warm it and then to set it on fire. Transported by contact with the trembling knees, quivering with emotion when the hand of Louise rested on his head, the king restrained his indulgence in that happiness, looking every moment for the return of the painter or of De Saint-Aignan. In that painful expectation he at times strove to escape the subtle allurement which penetrated his veins; he sought to induce a lethargy of heart and sense; he repulsed the reality ripe before him, to pursue its shadow.

But the door remained closed; and neither De Saint-Aignan nor the painter appeared, nor did the hangings even move. A mysterious and voluptuous silence reigned in the room, — a silence which seemed to influence even the birds in their gilded prison. The king, completely overcome, turned his head and buried his burning lips in La Vallière's hands, who lost control over herself and pressed her hands convulsively against her lover's lips.

Louis threw himself upon his knees; and as La Vallière did not move her head, the king's forehead being within reach of her lips, in her ecstasy she touched with a light and furtive kiss the perfumed locks which caressed her cheeks. The king seized her in his arms, and without resistance on her part they exchanged their first

kiss, — that burning kiss which changes love into a delirium.

Neither the painter nor De Saint-Aignan returned that day.

A sort of intoxication, slumbrous and sweet, which refreshed the sense and sent sleep circulating like a gentle poison through the veins, — that sleep ineffable, languorous as a happy life, — fell like a cloud between the past life and the life to come of the two lovers.

In the midst of that sleep full of dreams a continued noise was heard upon the upper floor, which at first disturbed La Vallière, but did not wholly arouse her attention. As the noise, however, continued, as it forced itself upon the attention, and recalled the poor girl from her dreams of happiness to the sad reality of life, she arose in a state of utter bewilderment, though beautiful in her disorder, saying, "Some one is waiting for me above. Louis, Louis, do you not hear?"

"Well, and am I not waiting for you also?" said the king, with infinite tenderness. "Let others henceforth wait for you."

But she gently shook her head, as she replied with tears in her eyes, "Happiness concealed! — power concealed! — my pride should be silent as my heart."

The noise was again resumed.

"I hear Montalais's voice," she said; and she hurried up the staircase. The king followed her, unable to let her leave his sight, and covering her hand with his kisses. "Yes, yes," repeated La Vallière, who had passed halfway through the opening; "yes, it is Montalais who is calling me. Something important must have happened."

"Go, then, dear love," said the king, "and return quickly."

"No, no, not to-day! Adieu, adieu!" she said, as she

stooped down once more to embrace her lover, and then escaped. Montalais was, in fact, waiting for her, very pale and agitated.

"Quick, quick! he is coming!" she said.

"Who? — who is coming?"

"He! I warned you of it."

"But who? You are killing me."

"Raoul," murmured Montalais.

"It is I, — I," said a joyous voice upon the last steps of the grand staircase.

La Vallière uttered a terrible shriek and threw herself back.

"Here I am, dear Louise," said Raoul, running forward. "Oh, I knew too well that you had not ceased to love me!"

La Vallière, with a gesture partly of extreme terror and partly as if invoking a curse, attempted to speak, but could articulate only a single word. "No, no!" she said; and she fell into Montalais's arms, murmuring, "Do not come near me."

Montalais made a sign to Raoul, who stood almost petrified at the door, and did not even attempt to advance another step into the room. Then, looking towards the side of the room where the screen was, she exclaimed, "Imprudent girl! she has not even closed the trap-door." Montalais advanced towards the corner of the room to close, first, the screen, and then, behind the screen, the trap-door. But suddenly the king, who had heard La Vallière's cry, darted through the opening, and hurried forward to her assistance. He threw himself on his knees before her, as he overwhelmed Montalais with questions, who hardly knew where she was.

At the moment, however, that the king fell on his knees, a cry of utter despair rang through the corridor,

accompanied by the sound of retreating footsteps. The king wished to run and see who had uttered the cry, and whose were the footsteps he had heard. It was in vain that Montalais sought to retain him, for the king, leaving La Vallière, hurried towards the door, — too late, however, for Raoul was already at a distance, and the king saw only a kind of shadow turning the angle of the corridor.

CHAPTER XLVII.

TWO OLD FRIENDS.

WHILE every one at court was busy with his own affairs, a man mysteriously took up his post behind the Place de Grève, in the house which we once saw besieged by D'Artagnan on the occasion of a riot. The principal entrance of this house was in the Place Baudoyer. The house was tolerably large, surrounded by gardens, enclosed in the Rue St. Jean by the shops of tool-makers, which protected it from prying looks; and was walled in by a triple rampart of stone, noise, and verdure, like an embalmed mummy in its triple coffin.

The man to whom we have just alluded walked along with a firm step, although he was no longer in his early prime. His dark cloak and long sword outlined beneath the cloak plainly revealed a man seeking adventures; and judging from his curling mustaches, his fine and smooth skin, as seen under his *sombrero*, the gallantry of his adventures was unquestionable. In fact, hardly had the cavalier entered the house, when the clock of St. Gervais struck eight; and ten minutes afterwards a lady, followed by an armed servant, approached and knocked at the same door, which an old woman immediately opened for her. The lady raised her veil as she entered; though no longer beautiful or young, she was still active, and of an imposing carriage. She concealed, beneath a rich toilet of exquisite taste, an age which Ninon de l'Enclos alone could have smiled at with impunity. Hardly had she

reached the vestibule, when the cavalier, whose features we have only roughly sketched, advanced towards her, holding out his hand.

"Good-day, my dear duchess," he said.

"How do you do, my dear Aramis?" replied the duchess.

He led her to an elegantly furnished apartment, on whose high windows were reflected the expiring rays of the setting sun, which filtered through the dark crests of some adjoining firs. They sat down side by side. Neither of them thought of asking for additional light in the room, and they buried themselves thus in the shadow, as if they had wished to bury themselves in forgetfulness.

"Chevalier," said the duchess, "you have never given me a single sign of life since our interview at Fontainebleau; and I confess that your presence there on the day of the Franciscan's death, and your initiation in certain secrets, caused me the liveliest astonishment I ever experienced in my whole life."

"I can explain my presence there to you, as well as my initiation," said Aramis.

"But let us, first of all," replied the duchess, quickly, "talk a little of ourselves, for our friendship is by no means of recent date."

"Yes, Madame; and if Heaven wills it, we shall continue to be friends, — I will not say for a long time, but forever."

"That is quite certain, Chevalier, and my visit is a proof of it."

"Our interests, Madame the Duchess, are no longer the same that they used to be," said Aramis, smiling without reserve in the dim light, which could not show that his smile was less agreeable and less bright than formerly.

"No, Chevalier, at the present day we have other interests. Every period of life brings its own; and as we now

understand each other in conversing as perfectly as we formerly did without saying a word, let us talk, if you like."

"I am at your orders, Duchess. Ah! I beg your pardon; how did you obtain my address, and what was your object?"

"You ask me why? I have told you. Curiosity, in the first place. I wished to know what you could have to do with the Franciscan with whom I had certain business, and who died so singularly. You know that on the occasion of our interview at Fontainebleau, in the cemetery, at the foot of the grave so recently closed, we were both so much overcome by our emotions that we omitted to confide anything to each other."

"Yes, Madame."

"Well, then, I had no sooner left you than I repented, and have ever since been most anxious to ascertain the truth. You know that Madame de Longueville and myself are almost one, I suppose?"

"I was not aware of it," said Aramis, discreetly.

"I remembered, then," continued the duchess, "that neither of us said anything to the other in the cemetery; that you did not speak of the relationship in which you stood to the Franciscan, whose burial you had superintended, and that I did not refer to the position in which I stood to him, — all which seemed to me very unworthy of two such old friends as ourselves; and I have sought an opportunity of an interview with you in order to give you proof that I had found you, and that Marie Michon, now no more, has left behind her a representative with a good memory."

Aramis bowed over the duchess's hand, and pressed his lips upon it. "You must have had some trouble to find me again," he said.

"Yes," answered the duchess, annoyed to find the subject taking a turn which Aramis wished to give it; "but I knew that you were a friend of M. Fouquet, and so I inquired in that direction."

"A friend! Oh," exclaimed the chevalier, "you exaggerate, Madame! A poor priest who has been favored by so generous a protector, and whose heart is full of gratitude and devotion to him, is all that I am to M. Fouquet."

"He made you a bishop?"

"Yes, Duchess."

"So, my fine musketeer, that is your retirement!"

"In the same way that political intrigue is for yourself," thought Aramis. "And so," he said, "you inquired after me at M. Fouquet's?"

"Easily enough. You had been to Fontainebleau with him, and had undertaken a voyage to your diocese,—which is Belle-Isle-en-Mer, I believe."

"No, Madame," said Aramis; "my diocese is Vannes."

"I meant that. I only thought that Belle-Isle-en-Mer —"

"Is a property belonging to M. Fouquet, — nothing more."

"Ah! I had been told that Belle-Isle was fortified; besides, I know that you are a military man, my friend."

"I have forgotten everything of the kind since I entered the church," said Aramis, annoyed.

"Very well. I then learned that you had returned from Vannes, and I sent to one of our friends, M. le Comte de la Fère, who is discretion itself; but he answered that he was not aware of your address."

"So like Athos," thought the bishop; "that which is actually good never alters."

"Well, then, you know that I cannot venture to show

myself here, and that the queen-mother has always some grievance or other against me."

"Yes, indeed; and I am surprised at it."

"Oh, there are various reasons for it! But, to continue, being obliged to conceal myself, I was fortunate enough to meet with M. d'Artagnan, — one of your old friends, I believe."

"A friend of mine still, Duchess."

"He gave me some information, and sent me to M. de Baisemeaux, the governor of the Bastille."

Aramis started; and a light flashed from his eyes in the darkness of the room which he could not conceal from his keen-sighted friend. "M. de Baisemeaux!" he said; "why did D'Artagnan send you to M. de Baisemeaux?"

"I cannot tell you."

"What can this possibly mean?" said the bishop, summoning all the resources of his mind to his aid, in order to carry on the combat in a befitting manner.

"M. de Baisemeaux is greatly indebted to you, D'Artagnan told me."

"True, he is so."

"And the address of a creditor is as easily ascertained as that of a debtor."

"Also very true; and so Baisemeaux indicated to you —"

"St. Mandé, where I forwarded a letter to you —"

"Which I have in my hand, and which is most precious to me," said Aramis, "because I am indebted to it for the pleasure of seeing you."

The duchess, satisfied at having so successfully passed over the various difficulties of so delicate an explanation, began to breathe freely again; which Aramis, however, could not succeed in doing. "We had got as far as your visit to Baisemeaux, I believe?" said he.

"Nay," said the duchess, laughing, "further than that."

"In that case we must have been speaking about your grudge against the queen-mother."

"Further still," returned the duchess, "further still; we were talking of the connection —"

"Which existed between you and the Franciscan," said Aramis, interrupting her eagerly; "well, I am listening to you very attentively."

"It is easily explained," returned the duchess, making up her mind. "You know that I am living at Brussels with M. de Laicques?"

"I have heard so, Madame."

"You know that my children have ruined and stripped me of everything?"

"How terrible, dear duchess!"

"Terrible, indeed! This obliged me to resort to some means of obtaining a livelihood, and particularly to avoid vegetating. I had old hatreds to turn to account, old friendships to serve; I no longer had either credit or protectors."

"You, too, who had extended protection towards so many persons," said Aramis, blandly.

"It is always the case, Chevalier. Well, at that time I saw the King of Spain."

"Ah!"

"Who had just nominated a general of the Jesuits, according to the usual custom."

"Is it usual, indeed?"

"Were you not aware of it?"

"I beg your pardon; I was inattentive."

"You must be aware of that, — you who were on such good terms with the Franciscan."

"With the general of the Jesuits, you mean?"

"Exactly. Well, then, I saw the King of Spain, who

wished to do me a service, but was unable. He gave me recommendations, however, to Flanders, both for myself and for Laicques, and conferred a pension on me out of the funds of the order."

"Of Jesuits?"

"Yes. The general — I mean the Franciscan — was sent to me; and in order to give regularity to the transaction, in accordance with the statutes of the order, I was reputed to be in a position to render certain services. You are aware that that is the rule?"

"I was not aware of it."

Madame de Chevreuse paused to look at Aramis, but it was quite dark. "Well, such is the rule," she resumed. "I ought, therefore, to seem to possess a power of usefulness of some kind or other. I proposed to travel for the order, and I was placed on the list of affiliated travellers. You understand that it was a formality, by means of which I received my pension, which was very convenient for me."

"Good heavens! Duchess, what you tell me is like a dagger-thrust to me. *You* obliged to receive a pension from the Jesuits?"

"No, Chevalier; from Spain."

"Ah! except as a conscientious scruple, Duchess, you will admit that it is pretty nearly the same thing."

"No, not at all."

"But, surely, of your magnificent fortune there must remain — "

"Dampierre is all that remains."

"And that is handsome enough."

"Yes; but Dampierre is burdened, mortgaged, and somewhat in ruins, like its owner."

"And can the queen-mother see all that without shedding a tear?" said Aramis, with a penetrating look, which encountered nothing but the darkness.

"Yes, she has forgotten everything."

"You have, I believe, Duchess, attempted to get restored to favor?"

"Yes; but, most singularly, the young king inherits the antipathy that his dear father had for me. Ah, you too will tell me that I am indeed a woman to be hated, and that I am no longer one who can be loved."

"Dear duchess, pray arrive soon at the circumstance which brought you here; for I think we can be of service to each other."

"Such has been my own thought. I came to Fontainebleau, then, with a double object in view. In the first place, I was summoned there by the Franciscan whom you knew. By the by, how did you know him? — for I have told you my story, and have not yet heard yours."

"I knew him in a very natural way, Duchess. I studied theology with him at Parma; we became fast friends, but it happened, from time to time, that business or travels or war separated us from each other."

"You were, of course, aware that he was the general of the Jesuits?"

"I suspected it."

"But by what extraordinary chance did you come to the hotel where the affiliated travellers had met together?"

"Oh," said Aramis, in a calm voice, "it was the merest chance in the world! I was going to Fontainebleau to see M. Fouquet, for the purpose of obtaining an audience of the king. I was passing by, unknown; I saw the poor dying monk in the road, and recognized him. You know the rest, — he died in my arms."

"Yes, but bequeathing to you so vast a power in heaven and on earth that you issue sovereign orders in his name."

"He did leave me a few commissions to settle."

"And for me?"

"I have told you, — a sum of twelve thousand livres was to be paid to you. I thought I had given you the necessary signature to enable you to receive it. Did you not get the money?"

"Oh, yes, yes! My dear prelate, you give your orders, I am informed, with so much mystery and such august majesty that it is generally believed you are the successor of the beloved dead."

Aramis colored impatiently, and the duchess continued. "I have obtained information," she said, "from the King of Spain himself; and he dispelled my doubts on the point. Every general of the Jesuits is nominated by him, and must be a Spaniard, according to the statutes of the order. You are not a Spaniard, nor have you been nominated by the King of Spain."

Aramis did not reply to this remark, except to say, "You see, Duchess, how greatly you were mistaken, since the King of Spain told you that."

"Yes, my dear Aramis; but there was something else of which I have been thinking."

"What is that?"

"You know that I do a great deal of desultory thinking; and it occurred to me that you know the Spanish language."

"Every Frenchman who has been actively engaged in the Fronde knows Spanish."

"You have lived in Flanders?"

"Three years."

"And have stayed at Madrid?"

"Fifteen months."

"You are in a position, then, to become a naturalized Spaniard when you like."

"Really?" said Aramis, with a frankness which deceived the duchess.

"Undoubtedly. Two years' residence and an acquaintance with the language are indispensable. You have had three years and a half, — fifteen months more than is necessary."

"What are you driving at, my dear lady?"

"At this, — I am on good terms with the King of Spain."

"And I am not on bad terms," thought Aramis to himself.

"Do you wish me to ask the king," continued the duchess, "to confer the succession to the Franciscan's office upon you?"

"Oh, Duchess!"

"You have it already, perhaps?" she said.

"No, upon my honor."

"Very well, then, I can render you that service."

"Why did you not render the same service to M. de Laicques, Duchess? He is a very talented man, and one whom you love."

"Yes, no doubt; but that is not to be considered. At all events, putting Laicques aside, answer me, will you have it?"

"No, I thank you, Duchess."

She paused. "He is nominated," she thought; and then resumed aloud, "If you refuse me in this manner, it is not very encouraging for me to ask anything of you."

"Oh, ask, pray ask!"

"Ask! I cannot do so if you have not the power to grant what I want."

"However limited my power and ability, ask all the same."

"I need a sum of money to restore Dampierre."

"Ah!" replied Aramis, coldly, "money? Well, Duchess, how much would you require?"

"Oh, a tolerably round sum!"

"So much the worse, — you know I am not rich."

"No, you are not; but the order is. And if you had been the general — "

"You know I am not the general."

"In that case you have a friend who must be very wealthy, — M. Fouquet."

"M. Fouquet! He is more than half ruined, Madame."

"So it is said, but I would not believe it."

"Why, Duchess?"

"Because I have, or rather Laicques has, certain letters in his possession from Cardinal Mazarin, which establish the existence of very strange accounts."

"What accounts?"

"Relative to various sums of money borrowed and disposed of. I do not fully remember; but the point is that the superintendent, according to these letters, which are signed by Mazarin, had taken thirty millions from the coffers of the State. The case is a very serious one."

Aramis clinched his hands in anxiety and apprehension. "Is it possible," he said, "that you have such letters, and have not communicated them to M. Fouquet?"

"Ah!" replied the Duchess, "I keep such little matters as these in reserve. When the day of need comes, we will take them from the closet."

"And that day has arrived?" said Aramis.

"Yes."

"And you are going to show those letters to M. Fouquet?"

"I prefer instead to talk about them with you."

"You must be in sad want of money, my poor friend,

to think of such things as these, — you, too, who held M. de Mazarin's prose effusions in such indifferent esteem."

"The fact is, I am in want of money."

"And then," continued Aramis, in cold accents, "it must have been very distressing to you to be obliged to have recourse to such a means. It is cruel."

"Oh, if I had wished to do harm instead of good," said Madame de Chevreuse, "instead of asking the general of the order or M. Fouquet for the five hundred thousand livres I require — "

"Five hundred thousand livres!"

"Yes; no more. Do you think it much? I require at least as much as that to restore Dampierre."

"Yes, Madame."

"I say, therefore, that instead of asking for this amount I should have gone to see my old friend the queen-mother; the letters from her husband, the Signor Mazarini, would have served me as an introduction, and I should have begged this mere trifle of her, saying to her, 'I wish, Madame, to have the honor of receiving your Majesty at Dampierre. Permit me to put Dampierre in a fit state for that purpose.'"

Aramis did not say a single word in reply. "Well," she said, "what are you thinking about?"

"I am making certain additions," said Aramis.

"And M. Fouquet makes subtractions. I, on the other hand, am trying the art of multiplication. What excellent calculators we are! How well we could understand one another!"

"Will you allow me to reflect?" said Aramis.

"No; to such an overture between persons like ourselves, 'Yes' or 'No' should be the reply, and that immediately."

"It is a snare," thought the bishop; "it is impossible

that Anne of Austria would listen to such a woman as this."

"Well!" said the Duchess.

"Well, Madame, I should be very much astonished if M. Fouquet had five hundred thousand livres at his disposal at the present moment."

"It is of no use speaking of it further, then," said the Duchess, "and Dampierre must get restored how it can."

"Oh, you are not embarrassed to such an extent as that, I suppose?"

"No; I am never embarrassed."

"And the queen," continued the bishop, "will certainly do for you what the superintendent is unable to do."

"Oh, certainly! But tell me, do you not think it would be better that I should speak myself to M. Fouquet about these letters?"

"You will do whatever you please in that respect, Duchess. M. Fouquet either feels or does not feel himself to be guilty. If he really be so, I know that he is proud enough not to confess it; if he be not so, he will be exceedingly offended at your menace."

"As usual, you reason like an angel," said the Duchess, rising.

"And so you are going to denounce M. Fouquet to the queen," said Aramis.

"Denounce? Oh, what a disagreeable word! I shall not denounce, my dear friend. You now know matters of policy too well to be ignorant how easily these affairs are arranged. I shall merely side against M. Fouquet, and nothing more; and in a war of party against party a weapon is a weapon."

"No doubt."

"And once on friendly terms again with the queen-mother, I may be dangerous towards some persons."

"You are at perfect liberty to be so, Duchess."

"A liberty of which I shall avail myself, my dear friend."

"You are not ignorant, I suppose, Duchess, that M. Fouquet is on the best terms with the King of Spain?"

"Oh, I suppose so!"

"If, therefore, you begin a party warfare against M. Fouquet, he will reply in the same way; for he too is at perfect liberty to do so, is he not?"

"Oh, certainly!"

"And as he is on good terms with Spain, he will make use of that friendship as a weapon."

"You mean that he will be on good terms with the general of the order of the Jesuits, my dear Aramis."

"That may be the case, Duchess."

"And that, consequently, the pension I have been receiving from the order will be stopped."

"I am greatly afraid it might be."

"Well, I must contrive to console myself; for after Richelieu, after the Frondes, after exile, what is there left for Madame de Chevreuse to fear?"

"The pension, you are aware, is forty-eight thousand livres."

"Alas! I am quite aware of it."

"Moreover, in party contests, you know, the friends of the enemy do not escape."

"Ah! you mean that poor Laicques will have to suffer."

"I am afraid it is almost inevitable, Duchess."

"Oh, he receives only twelve thousand livres' pension."

"Yes, but the King of Spain has some influence left; advised by M. Fouquet, he might get M. Laicques shut up in some fortress."

"I have no great fear of that, my good friend; because, thanks to a reconciliation with Anne of Austria, I will

undertake that France shall insist upon Laicques's liberation."

"True. In that case you will have something else to apprehend."

"What can that be?" said the duchess, pretending to be surprised and terrified.

"You will learn — indeed, you must know it already — that having once been an affiliated member of the order, it is not easy to leave it; for the secrets that any particular member may have acquired are unwholesome, and carry with them the germs of misfortune for whoever may reveal them."

The duchess considered for a moment, and then said, "That is more serious; I will think it over."

Notwithstanding the profound obscurity in which he sat, Aramis seemed to feel a burning glance, like a hot iron, escape from his friend's eyes and plunge into his heart.

"Let us recapitulate," said Aramis, determined to keep himself on his guard, and gliding his hand into his breast, where he had a dagger concealed.

"Exactly, let us recapitulate; good accounts make good friends."

"The suppression of your pension — "

"Forty-eight thousand livres and that of Laicques's twelve make together sixty thousand livres; that is what you mean, I suppose?"

"Precisely; and I was trying to find out what would be your equivalent for that."

"Five hundred thousand livres, which I shall get from the queen."

"Or which you will not get."

"I know a means of procuring them," said the duchess, thoughtlessly.

This remark made the chevalier prick up his ears; and

from the moment when his adversary had committed this error, his mind was so thoroughly on its guard that he seemed every moment to gain the advantage more and more, and she, consequently, to lose it. "I will admit, for argument's sake, that you obtain the money," he resumed; "you will lose twice as much, having a hundred thousand livres' pension to receive instead of sixty thousand, and that for a period of ten years."

"Not so, for I shall only be subjected to this diminution of my income during the period of M. Fouquet's remaining in power, — a period which I estimate at two months."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"I am frank, you see."

"I thank you for it, Duchess; but you would be wrong to suppose that after M. Fouquet's disgrace the order would resume the payment of your pension."

"I know a means of making the order come down with its money, as I know a means of forcing the queen-mother to concede what I require."

"In that case, Duchess, we are all obliged to strike our flags to you. The victory is yours, and the triumph also is yours. Be clement, I entreat you!"

"But is it possible," resumed the duchess, without taking notice of the irony, "that you really draw back from a miserable sum of five hundred thousand livres when it is a question of sparing you — I mean your friend — I beg your pardon, I ought rather to say your protector — the disagreeable consequences which a party contest produces?"

"Duchess, I will tell you why. Supposing the five hundred thousand livres were to be given to you, M. de Laicques will require his share, which will be another five hundred thousand livres, I presume; and then, after M.

de Laicques's and your own portions, will come the portions for your children, your poor pensioners, and various other persons; and these letters, however compromising they may be, are not worth from three to four millions. Good heavens! Duchess, the Queen of France's diamonds were surely worth more than these bits of waste paper signed by Mazarin; and yet their recovery did not cost a fourth part of what you ask for yourself."

"Yes, that is true; but the merchant values his goods at his own price, and it is for the purchaser to buy or to refuse."

"Stay a moment, Duchess; would you like me to tell you why I will not buy your letters?"

"Pray tell me."

"Because the letters which you say are Mazarin's are false."

"Nonsense!"

"I have no doubt of it; for it would, to say the least, be very singular that after you had quarrelled with the queen through M. Mazarin's means, you should have kept up any intimate acquaintance with the latter; it would savor of passion, of treachery, of— Upon my word, I do not like to make use of the term."

"Oh pray say it!"

"Of compliance."

"That is quite true; but what is not less so is that which the letter contains."

"I pledge you my word, Duchess, that you will not be able to make use of it with the queen."

"Oh, yes, indeed; I can make use of everything with the queen."

"Very good," thought Aramis. "Croak on, old owl! hiss, viper that you are!"

But the duchess had said enough, and advanced a few

steps towards the door. Aramis, however, had reserved a humiliation which she did not expect,—the imprecation of the vanquished behind the car of the conqueror. He rang the bell. Candles immediately appeared in the room; and the bishop found himself completely encircled by lights, which shone upon the worn, haggard face of the duchess. Aramis fixed a long and ironical look upon her pale and withered cheeks, upon her dim, dull eyes, and upon her lips, which she kept carefully closed over her blackened and scanty teeth. He, however, had thrown himself into a graceful attitude, with his haughty and intelligent head thrown back; he smiled so as to reveal his teeth, which were still brilliant and dazzling in the candle-light.

The old coquette understood the trick that had been played upon her. She was standing immediately before a large mirror, in which all her decrepitude, so carefully concealed, was only made more manifest by the contrast. Thereupon, without even saluting Aramis, who bowed with the ease and grace of the musketeer of early days, she hurried away with tottering steps, which her very haste only the more impeded. Aramis sprang across the room like a zephyr to lead her to the door. Madame de Chevreuse made a sign to her huge lackey, who resumed his musket; and she left the house where such tender friends had not been able to understand each other only because they had understood each other too well.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WHEREIN MAY BE SEEN THAT A BARGAIN WHICH CANNOT BE MADE WITH ONE PERSON CAN BE CARRIED OUT WITH ANOTHER.

ARAMIS had been perfectly correct in his supposition. Immediately on leaving the house in the Place Baudoyer, Madame de Chevreuse had proceeded homeward. She was doubtless afraid of being followed, and had sought in this way to cover her steps; but as soon as she had arrived within the door of the hotel, and assured herself that no one who could cause her any uneasiness was on her track, she opened the door of the garden leading into another street, and hurried towards the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, where M. Colbert resided.

We have already said that evening, or rather night, had closed in, — and it was a dark, thick night. Paris had once more sunk into its calm, quiescent state, enshrouding alike within its indulgent mantle the high-born duchess carrying out her political intrigue, and the simple citizen's wife who having been detained late by a supper in the city was proceeding homewards, on the arm of a lover, by the longest possible route.

Madame de Chevreuse had been too well accustomed to nocturnal politics not to know that a minister never denies himself, even at his own private residence, to any young and beautiful woman who may chance to object to the dust and confusion of a public office; or to old women, as full of experience as of years, who dislike the indiscreet echo of official residences. A valet received the duchess under the peristyle, and received her, it must be admitted, with some indifference of manner; he intimated, after having looked at her face, that it was hardly at such an hour that one so advanced in years as herself could be permitted to disturb M. Colbert's important occupations. But Madame de Chevreuse, without disquietude, wrote her name upon a leaf of her tablets,—a blusterous name, which had so often sounded disagreeably in the ears of Louis XIII. and of the great cardinal. She wrote her name in the large ill-formed characters of the higher classes of that period, folded the paper in a manner peculiarly her own, and handed it to the valet without uttering a word, but with so haughty and imperious a gesture that the fellow, well accustomed to judge of people from their manners and appearance, perceived at once the quality of the person before him, bowed his head, and ran to M. Colbert's room.

The minister could not control a sudden exclamation as he opened the paper; and the valet, gathering from it the interest with which his master regarded the mysterious visitor, returned as fast as he could to beg the duchess to follow him. She ascended to the first floor of the beautiful new house very slowly, rested herself on the landing-place in order not to enter the apartment out of breath, and appeared before M. Colbert, who with his own hands held open the folding-doors. The duchess paused at the threshold for the purpose of studying well the character of

the man with whom she was about to converse. At the first glance the round, large, heavy head, thick brows, and ill-favored features of Colbert, who wore, thrust low down on his head, a cap like a priest's *calotte*, seemed to indicate that but little difficulty was likely to be met with in her negotiations with him, but also that she was to expect little interest in the discussion of particulars; for there was scarcely any indication that that rude man could be susceptible to the attractions of a refined revenge or of an exalted ambition. But when on closer inspection the duchess perceived the small, piercingly black eyes, the longitudinal wrinkles of his high and massive forehead, the imperceptible twitching of the lips, on which were apparent traces of rough good-humor, she changed her mind and said to herself, "I have found the man I want."

"What has procured me the honor of your visit, Madame?" he inquired.

"The need I have of you, Monsieur," returned the duchess, "and that which you have of me."

"I am delighted, Madame, with the first portion of your sentence; but so far as the second portion is concerned —"

Madame de Chevreuse sat down in the arm-chair which M. Colbert placed before her. "M. Colbert, you are the intendant of finances?"

"Yes, Madame."

"And are ambitious of becoming the superintendent?"

"Madame!"

"Nay, do not deny it! That would only unnecessarily prolong our conversation, — it is useless."

"And yet, Madame," replied the intendant, "however well disposed and inclined to show politeness I may be towards a lady of your position and merit, nothing will

make me confess that I have ever entertained the idea of supplanting my superior."

"I said nothing about supplanting, M. Colbert. Could I accidentally have made use of that word? I hardly think so. The word 'replace' is less aggressive in its signification, and more grammatically suitable, as M. de Voiture would say. I presume, therefore, that you are ambitious of replacing M. Fouquet."

"M. Fouquet's fortune, Madame, enables him to withstand all attempts. The superintendent in this age plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; the vessels pass beneath him, and do not overthrow him."

"I ought to have availed myself of that very comparison. It is true. M. Fouquet plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; but I remember to have heard it said by M. Conrart (a member of the Academy, I believe), that when the Colossus of Rhodes fell from its lofty position, the merchant who had cast it down — a merchant, nothing more, M. Colbert — loaded four hundred camels with the ruins. A merchant! — that is considerably less than an intendant of finances."

"Madame, I can assure you that I shall never overthrow M. Fouquet."

"Very good, M. Colbert, since you persist in showing so much sensitiveness with me, as if you were ignorant that I am Madame de Chevreuse, and also that I am somewhat advanced in years, — in other words, that you have to do with a woman who has had political dealings with the Cardinal de Richelieu, and who has no time to lose, — since, I say, you commit that imprudence, I shall go and find others who are more intelligent and more desirous of making their fortunes."

"How, Madame, how?"

"You give me a very poor idea of the negotiations of

the present day, Monsieur. I assure you that if in my time a woman had gone to M. de Cinq-Mars, who was not moreover a man of a very high order of intellect, and had said to him about the cardinal what I have just now said to you of M. Fouquet, M. de Cinq-Mars would by this time have put his irons in the fire."

"Nay, Madame, show a little indulgence."

"Well, then, you do really consent to replace M. Fouquet?"

"Certainly, I do, if the king dismisses M. Fouquet."

"Again a word too much; it is quite evident that if you have not yet succeeded in driving M. Fouquet from his post, it is because you have not been able to do so. Therefore I should be a simpleton if in coming to you I did not bring you the very thing you require."

"I am distressed to be obliged to persist, Madame," said Colbert, after a silence which enabled the duchess to sound the depth of his dissimulation; "but I must warn you that for the last six years denunciation after denunciation has been made against M. Fouquet, and he has remained unshaken and unaffected by them."

"There is a time for everything, M. Colbert; those who were the authors of such denunciations were not called Madame de Chevreuse, and they had no proofs equal to the six letters from M. de Mazarin which establish the offence in question."

"The offence!"

"The crime, if you like it better."

"The crime — committed by M. Fouquet!"

"Nothing less. It is rather strange, M. Colbert; but your face, which just now was cold and indifferent, is now all lighted up."

"A crime!"

"I am delighted to see it makes an impression upon you."

"Oh, that is a word, Madame, which embraces so many things!"

"It embraces the post of superintendent of finance for yourself, and a letter of exile or the Bastille for M. Fouquet."

"Forgive me, Madame the Duchess, but it is almost impossible that M. Fouquet can be exiled; to be imprisoned or disgraced, that alone is much."

"Oh, I am perfectly aware of what I am saying!" returned Madame de Chevreuse, coldly. "I do not live at such a distance from Paris as not to know what takes place there. The king does not like M. Fouquet, and he would willingly sacrifice the superintendent if an opportunity were only presented."

"It must be a good one, though."

"Good enough, and one I estimate to be worth five hundred thousand livres."

"In what way?" said Colbert.

"I mean, Monsieur, that holding this opportunity in my own hands I will not allow it to be transferred to yours except for a sum of five hundred thousand livres."

"I understand you perfectly, Madame. But since you have fixed a price for the sale, let me now see the value of the articles to be sold."

"Oh, a mere trifle, — six letters, as I have already told you, from M. de Mazarin; and the autographs will most assuredly not be regarded as too costly, if they establish in an irrefutable manner that M. Fouquet has embezzled large sums of money from the treasury and appropriated them to his own purposes."

"In an irrefutable manner, do you say?" observed Colbert, whose eyes sparkled with delight.

"Irrefutable; would you like to read the letters?"

"With all my heart! Copies, of course?"

"Of course, the copies," said the duchess, as she drew from her bosom a small packet of papers flattened by her velvet bodice. "Read!" she said.

Colbert eagerly snatched the papers and devoured them.

"Wonderful!" he said.

"It is clear enough, is it not?"

"Yes, Madame, yes. M. Mazarin must have handed the money to M. Fouquet, who must have kept it for his own purposes; but the question is, what money?"

"Exactly, — what money; if we come to terms, I will join to these six letters a seventh, which will supply you with the fullest particulars."

Colbert reflected. "And the originals of these letters?"

"A useless question to ask; exactly as if I were to ask you, M. Colbert, whether the money-bags you will give me will be full or empty."

"Very good, Madame."

"Is it concluded?"

"No; for there is one circumstance to which neither of us has given any attention."

"Name it!"

"M. Fouquet can be utterly ruined, under the circumstances you have detailed, only by means of legal proceedings."

"Well?"

"A public scandal."

"Yes, what then?"

"Neither the legal proceedings nor the scandal can be begun against him."

"Why not?"

"Because he is procureur-général of the parliament; because, too, in France, the government, the army, the courts of law, and commerce are intimately connected by ties of good-will, which people call *esprit de corps*. So,

Madame, the parliament will never permit its chief to be dragged before a public tribunal; and never, even if he be dragged there by royal authority, never will he be condemned."

"Ah! *ma foi!* M. Colbert, that does n't concern me."

"I am aware of that, Madame; but it concerns me, and it consequently diminishes the value of what you have brought to me. Of what use to bring me a proof of crime, without the possibility of condemnation?"

"Even if he be only suspected, M. Fouquet will lose his post of superintendent."

"That would be a great achievement!" exclaimed Colbert, whose dark, gloomy features were momentarily lighted up by an expression of hate and vengeance.

"Ah, ah! M. Colbert," said the duchess, "forgive me, but I did not think you were so impressionable. Very good; in that case, since you need more than I have to give you, there is no occasion to speak of the matter further."

"Yes, Madame, we will go on talking of it; only, as the value of your commodities has decreased, you must lower your price."

"You are bargaining, then?"

"Every man who wishes to deal loyally is obliged to do so."

"How much will you offer me?"

"Two hundred thousand livres," said Colbert.

The duchess laughed in his face, and then said suddenly, "Wait a moment, I have another arrangement to propose; will you give me three hundred thousand livres?"

"No, no."

"Oh, you can either accept or refuse my terms; besides, that is not all."

"More still? You are becoming too impracticable to deal with, Madame."

"Less so than you think, perhaps, for it is not money I am going to ask you for."

"What is it, then?"

"A service. You know that I have always been most affectionately attached to the queen, and I am desirous of having an interview with her Majesty."

"With the queen?"

"Yes, M. Colbert, with the queen, who is, I admit, no longer my friend, and who has ceased to be so for a long time past, but who may again become so if the opportunity be only given her."

"Her Majesty has ceased to receive any one, Madame. She is a great sufferer, and you may be aware that the paroxysms of her disease occur with greater frequency than ever."

"That is the very reason why I wish to have an interview with her Majesty. In Flanders we have many diseases of that kind."

"Cancers? — a fearful, incurable disorder."

"Do not believe that, M. Colbert. The Flemish peasant is something of a savage; he has not a wife exactly, but a female."

"Well, Madame?"

"Well, M. Colbert, while he is smoking his pipe, the woman works; it is she who draws the water from the well, — she who loads the mule or the ass, and even bears herself a portion of the burden. Taking but little care of herself, she gets knocked about here and there, sometimes is even beaten. Cancers arise from contusions."

"True, true!" said Colbert.

"The Flemish women do not die the sooner on that account. When they are great sufferers from this disease,

they go in search of remedies; and the Béguines of Bruges are excellent doctors for every kind of disease. They have precious waters of one sort or another,— specifics of various kinds; and they give a bottle and a wax candle to the sufferer. They derive a profit from the priests, and serve God by the disposal of their two articles of merchandise. I will take the queen some of this holy water, which I will procure from the Béguines of Bruges; her Majesty will recover, and will burn as many wax candles as she may think fit. You see, M. Colbert, to prevent my seeing the queen is almost as bad as committing the crime of regicide."

"You are, Madame the Duchess, a woman of great intelligence. You surprise me; still, I cannot but suppose that this charitable consideration towards the queen covers some small personal interest of your own."

"Have I tried to conceal it, M. Colbert? You spoke, I believe, of a small personal interest. Understand, then, that it is a great interest; and I will prove it to you by resuming what I was saying. If you procure me a personal interview with her Majesty, I will be satisfied with the three hundred thousand livres I have demanded; if not, I shall keep my letters, unless, indeed, you give me on the spot five hundred thousand livres for them."

And rising from her seat with this decisive remark, the old duchess left M. Colbert in a disagreeable perplexity. To bargain any further was out of the question; not to purchase would involve infinite loss. "Madame," he said, "I shall have the pleasure of handing you over a hundred thousand crowns; but how shall I get the actual letters themselves?"

"In the simplest manner in the world, my dear M. Colbert, — whom will you trust?"

The financier began to laugh silently, so that his large

eyebrows went up and down like the wings of a bat upon the deep lines of his yellow forehead. "No one," he said.

"You surely will make an exception in your own favor, M. Colbert?"

"How is that, Madame?"

"I mean that if you would take the trouble to accompany me to the place where the letters are, they would be delivered into your own hands, and you would be able to verify and check them."

"Quite true."

"You would bring the hundred thousand crowns with you at the same time? — for I too do not trust any one."

Colbert colored to the tips of his ears. Like all eminent men in the art of figures, he was of an insolent and mathematical probity. "I will take with me, Madame," he said, "two orders for the amount agreed upon, payable at my treasury. Will that satisfy you?"

"Would that the orders on your treasury were for two millions, Monsieur the Intendant! I shall have the pleasure of showing you the way, then?"

"Allow me to order my carriage."

"I have a carriage below, Monsieur."

Colbert coughed like an irresolute man. He imagined for a moment that the proposition of the duchess was a snare; that perhaps some one was waiting at the door; and that she, whose secret had just been sold to Colbert for a hundred thousand crowns, had already offered it to Fouquet for the same sum. As he still hesitated a good deal, the duchess looked at him full in the face.

"You prefer your own carriage?" she said.

"I admit that I do."

"You suppose that I am going to lead you into a snare or trap of some sort or other?"

"Madame the Duchess, you have the character of being somewhat inconsiderate at times; and as I am clothed in a sober, solemn character, a jest or practical joke might compromise me."

"Yes; the fact is, you are afraid. Well, then, take your own carriage, as many servants as you like. Only, consider well, — what we two may arrange between us, we are the only persons who know it; what a third person may witness, we announce to the universe. After all, I do not make a point of it; my carriage shall follow yours, and I shall be satisfied to accompany you in your own carriage to the queen."

"To the queen!"

"Have you forgotten that already? Is it possible that one of the clauses of the agreement, of so much importance to me, can have escaped you already? How trifling it seems to you, indeed! If I had known it, I should have doubled my price."

"I have reflected, Madame, and I shall not accompany you."

"Really, — and why not?"

"Because I have the most perfect confidence in you."

"You overpower me. But how do I receive the hundred thousand crowns?"

"Here they are, Madame," said Colbert, scribbling a few lines on a piece of paper, which he handed to the duchess, adding, "You are paid."

"The trait is a fine one, M. Colbert, and I will reward you for it," she said, beginning to laugh.

Madame de Chevreuse's laugh had a very sinister sound. Every man who feels youth, faith, love, life itself, throbbing in his heart, would prefer tears to such a lamentable laugh.

The duchess opened the front of her dress and drew

forth from her bosom, somewhat less white than it once had been, a small packet of papers, tied with a flame-colored ribbon, and still laughing, she said, "There, M. Colbert, are the originals of Cardinal Mazarin's letters. They are now your own property," she added, refastening the body of her dress. "Your fortune is secured; and now accompany me to the queen."

"No, Madame; if you are again about to run the chance of her Majesty's displeasure, and it were known at the Palais-Royal that I had been the means of introducing you there, the queen would never forgive me while she lived. No; there are certain persons at the palace who are devoted to me, who will procure you an admission without my being compromised."

"Just as you please, provided I enter."

"What do you term those religious women at Bruges who cure disorders?"

"Béguines."

"Good; you are a Béguine."

"As you please, but I must soon cease to be one."

"That is your affair."

"Excuse me, but I do not wish to be exposed to a refusal."

"That is again your own affair, Madame. I am going to give directions to the head valet of the gentleman in waiting on her Majesty to allow admission to a Béguine, who brings an effectual remedy for her Majesty's sufferings. You are the bearer of my letter, you will undertake to be provided with the remedy, and will give every explanation on the subject. I admit a knowledge of a Béguine, but I deny all knowledge of Madame de Chevreuse. Here, Madame, then, is your letter of introduction."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SKIN OF THE BEAR.

COLBERT handed the duchess the letter, and gently drew aside the chair behind which she was standing. Madame de Chevreuse, with a very slight bow, immediately left the room. Colbert, who had recognized Mazarin's handwriting and had counted the letters, rang to summon his secretary, whom he enjoined to go in immediate search of M. Vanel, a counsellor of the parliament. The secretary replied that, according to his usual practice, M. Vanel had just at that moment entered the house, in order to render to the intendant an account of the principal details of the business which had been transacted during the day in the sitting of the parliament. Colbert approached one of the lamps, read the letters of the deceased cardinal over again, smiled repeatedly as he recognized the great value of the papers which Madame de Chevreuse had just delivered to him, and burying his head in his hands for a few minutes reflected profoundly. In the mean time a tall, large-made man entered the room; his spare, thin face, steady look, and hooked nose, as he entered Colbert's cabinet with a modest assurance of manner, revealed a character at once supple and decided, — supple towards the master who could throw him the prey; firm towards the dogs who might possibly be disposed to dispute it with him. M. Vanel carried a voluminous bundle of papers under his arm, and placed it on the desk on which Colbert was leaning both his elbows, as he supported his head.

"Good-day, M. Vanel," said the latter, rousing himself from his meditation.

"Good-day, Monseigneur," said Vanel, naturally.

"You should say 'Monsieur,' and not 'Monseigneur,'" replied Colbert, gently.

"We give the title of 'Monseigneur' to ministers," returned Vanel, with extreme self-possession, "and you are a minister."

"Not yet."

"You are so in point of fact, and I call you 'Monseigneur' accordingly; besides, you are my seigneur, and that is sufficient. If you dislike my calling you 'Monseigneur' before others, allow me, at least, to call you so in private."

Colbert raised his head to the height of the lamps, and read, or tried to read, upon Vanel's face how much actual sincerity entered into this protestation of devotion. But the counsellor knew perfectly well how to sustain the weight of his look, even were it armed with the full authority of the title he had conferred. Colbert sighed. He had read nothing in Vanel's face; Vanel might be sincere. Colbert recollected that this man, inferior to himself, was superior to him in having an unfaithful wife. At the moment he was pitying this man's lot, Vanel coolly drew from his pocket a perfumed letter, sealed with Spanish wax, and held it towards Colbert, saying, "A letter from my wife, Monseigneur."

Colbert coughed, took, opened, and read the letter, and then put it carefully away in his pocket; while Vanel, unconcerned, turned over the leaves of the papers he had brought with him.

"Vanel," Colbert said suddenly to his *protégé*, "you are a hard-working man?"

"Yes, Monseigneur."

"Would twelve hours of labor frighten you?"

"I work fifteen hours every day."

"Impossible! A counsellor need not work more than three hours a day in the parliament."

"Oh! I am working up some returns for a friend of mine in the department of accounts; and as I still have time left on my hands, I am studying Hebrew."

"Your reputation stands high in the parliament, Vanel."

"I believe so, Monseigneur."

"You must not grow rusty in your post of counsellor."

"What must I do to avoid it?"

"Purchase a high place. Small ambitions are the most difficult to satisfy."

"Small purses are the most difficult to fill, Monseigneur."

"What post have you in view?" said Colbert.

"I see none, — not one."

"There is one, certainly; but one need be the king himself to be able to buy it without inconvenience; and the king will not be inclined, I suppose, to purchase the post of procureur-général."

At these words Vanel fixed his dull and humble look upon Colbert, who could hardly tell whether Vanel had comprehended him or not. "Why do you speak to me, Monseigneur," said Vanel, "of the post of procureur-général to the parliament? I know no other post than the one M. Fouquet fills."

"Exactly so, my dear counsellor."

"You are not over-fastidious, Monseigneur; but before the post can be bought, it must be offered for sale."

"I believe, M. Vanel, that it will be for sale before long."

"For sale? What! M. Fouquet's post of procureur-général?"

"So it is said."

"The post which renders him inviolable, for sale! Oh, oh!" said Vanel, beginning to laugh.

"Would you be afraid, then, of the post?" said Colbert, gravely.

"Afraid! no; but —"

"Nor desirous of obtaining it?"

"You are laughing at me, Monseigneur," replied Vanel; "is it likely that a counsellor of the parliament would not be desirous of becoming procureur-général?"

"Well, M. Vanel, since I tell you that the post will be shortly for sale —"

"I cannot help repeating, Monseigneur, that it is impossible; a man never throws away the buckler behind which he maintains his honor, his fortune, and his life."

"There are certain men mad enough, Vanel, to fancy themselves out of the reach of all mischances."

"Yes, Monseigneur; but such men never commit their mad acts for the advantage of the poor Vanels of the world."

"Why not?"

"For the very reason that those Vanels are poor."

"It is true that M. Fouquet's post might cost a good round sum. What would you bid for it, M. Vanel?"

"Everything I am worth."

"Which means —"

"Three or four hundred thousand livres."

"And the post is worth —"

"A million and a half, at the very lowest. I know persons who have offered seventeen hundred thousand livres, without being able to persuade M. Fouquet to sell. Besides, supposing it were to happen that M. Fouquet wished to sell, — which I do not believe, in spite of what I have been told —"

"Ah, you have heard something about it, then! Who told you?"

"M. Gourville, M. Pellisson, and others."

"Very good; if, therefore, M. Fouquet did wish to sell —"

"I could not buy it just yet, since the superintendent will only sell for ready money, and no one has a million and a half to throw down at once."

Colbert suddenly interrupted the counsellor by an imperious gesture; he had begun to meditate. Observing his superior's serious attitude, and his perseverance in continuing the conversation on this subject, Vanel awaited the solution without venturing to precipitate it.

"Explain fully to me," said Colbert, at length, "the privileges of the office of procureur-général."

"The right of impeaching every French subject who is not a prince of the blood; the right of quashing all proceedings taken against any Frenchman who is neither king nor prince. The procureur-général is the arm of the king to strike the evil-doer, — his arm also to extinguish the torch of justice. M. Fouquet, therefore, will be able, by stirring up the parliament, to maintain himself even against the king; and the king also, by humoring M. Fouquet, can get his edicts registered without opposition. The procureur-général can be a very useful or a very dangerous instrument."

"Vanel, would you like to be procureur-général?" said Colbert, suddenly, softening both his look and his voice.

"I!" exclaimed the latter; "I have already had the honor to represent to you that I want about eleven hundred thousand livres to make up the amount."

"Borrow that sum from your friends."

"I have no friends richer than myself."

"You are an honorable man, Vanel."

"Ah, Monseigneur, if the world were to think as you do!"

"I think so, and that is quite enough; and if it should be needed, I will be your security."

"Remember the proverb, Monseigneur."

"What is that?"

"'The endorser pays.'"

"Let that make no difference."

Vanel rose, quite bewildered by this offer, which had been so suddenly and unexpectedly made to him by a man who treated the smallest affairs in a serious spirit. "You are not trifling with me, Monseigneur?" he said.

"Stay! we must act quickly. You say that M. Gourville has spoken to you about M. Fouquet's post?"

"Yes, and M. Pellisson also."

"Officially or officiously?"

"These were their words: 'These parliamentary people are ambitious and wealthy; they ought to get together two or three millions among themselves, to present to their protector and great luminary, M. Fouquet.'"

"And what did you reply?"

"I said that, for my own part, I would give ten thousand livres if necessary."

"Ah, you like M. Fouquet, then!" exclaimed Colbert, with a look full of hatred.

"No; but M. Fouquet is our chief. He is in debt, — is on the high-road to ruin; and we ought to save the honor of the body of which we are members."

"This explains to me why M. Fouquet will be always safe and sound so long as he occupies his present post," replied Colbert.

"Thereupon," said Vanel, "M. Gourville added: 'If we were to do anything out of charity to M. Fouquet, it could not be otherwise than most humiliating to him; and he

would be sure to refuse it. Let the parliament subscribe among themselves to purchase in a proper manner the post of procureur-général. In that case all would go on well; the honor of our body would be saved, and M. Fouquet's pride spared.'"

"That is an opening."

"I considered it so, Monseigneur."

"Well, M. Vanel, you will go at once, and find out either M. Gourville or M. Pellisson. Do you know any other friend of M. Fouquet?"

"I know M. de la Fontaine very well."

"La Fontaine, the rhymester?"

"Yes; he used to write verses to my wife, when M. Fouquet was one of our friends."

"Go to him, then, and try to procure an interview with the superintendent."

"Willingly — but the sum?"

"On the day and hour when you arrange to settle the matter, M. Vanel, you shall be supplied with the money; so do not make yourself uneasy on that account."

"Monseigneur, such munificence! You eclipse kings even, — you surpass M. Fouquet himself."

"Stay a moment! Do not let us mistake each other. I do not make you a present of fourteen hundred thousand livres, M. Vanel, for I have children to provide for; but I will lend you that sum."

"Ask whatever interest, whatever security you please, Monseigneur; I am quite ready. And when all your requisitions are satisfied, I will still repeat that you surpass kings and M. Fouquet in munificence. What conditions do you impose?"

"The repayment in eight years, and a mortgage upon the appointment itself."

"Certainly. Is that all?"

"Wait a moment! I reserve to myself the right of purchasing the post from you at one hundred and fifty thousand livres' profit for yourself, if in your mode of filling the office you do not follow out a line of conduct in conformity with the interests of the king and with my projects."

"Ah! ah!" said Vanel, in a slightly altered tone.

"Is there anything in that which can possibly be objectionable to you, M. Vanel?" said Colbert, coldly.

"Oh, no, no!" replied Vanel, quickly.

"Very good. We will sign an agreement to that effect whenever you like. And now go as quickly as you can to M. Fouquet's friends, and obtain an interview with the superintendent. Do not be too difficult in making whatever concessions may be required of you; and when once the arrangements are all made —"

"I will press him to sign."

"Be most careful to do nothing of the kind; do not speak of signatures with M. Fouquet, nor of deeds, nor even ask him to pass his word. Understand this, otherwise you will lose everything. All you have to do is to get M. Fouquet to give you his hand on the matter. Go, go!"

CHAPTER L.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE QUEEN-MOTHER.

THE queen-mother was in her bedroom at the Palais-Royal, with Madame de Motteville and the Señora Molina. The king, who had been impatiently expected the whole day, had not made his appearance; and the queen, who had grown quite impatient, had often sent to inquire about him. The whole atmosphere of the court seemed to indicate an approaching storm; the courtiers and the ladies of the court avoided meeting in the antechambers and the corridors, in order not to converse on compromising subjects.

Monsieur had joined the king early in the morning for a hunting-party; Madame remained in her own apartments, cool and distant to every one; and the queen-mother, after she had said her prayers in Latin, talked of domestic matters with her two friends in pure Castilian. Madame de Motteville, who understood the language perfectly, answered her in French. When the three ladies had exhausted every form of dissimulation and politeness to reach at last the charge that the king's conduct was causing grief to the queen and the queen-mother and all his family, and when in guarded phrases they had fulminated every variety of imprecation against Mademoiselle de la Vallière, the queen-mother terminated these recriminations by an exclamation indicative of her own reflections and character. "*Estos hijos!*" said she to Molina (which means, "These children!" — words full of meaning on a mother's lips, — words full of terrible significance in the

mouth of a queen who, like Anne of Austria, hid many curious and dark secrets in her soul).

"Yes," said Molina, "these children! for whom every mother becomes a sacrifice."

"To whom," replied the queen, "a mother has sacrificed everything."

Anne did not finish her phrase; for she fancied, when she raised her eyes towards the full-length portrait of the pale Louis XIII., that light had once more flashed from her husband's dull eyes, and that his nostrils were inflated by wrath. The portrait became a living being; it did not speak, it threatened.

A profound silence succeeded the queen's last remark. La Molina began to turn over the ribbons and lace of a large work-table. Madame de Motteville, surprised at the look of mutual intelligence which had been exchanged between the confidante and her mistress, cast down her eyes like a discreet woman, and pretending to be observant of nothing that was passing listened with the utmost attention. She heard nothing, however, but a very significant "Hum!" on the part of the Spanish duenna, who was the image of circumspection, and a profound sigh on the part of the queen. She looked up immediately. "You are suffering?" she said.

"No, Motteville, no; why do you say that?"

"Your Majesty almost groaned just now."

"You are right; I do suffer a little."

"M. Vallot is not far off; I believe he is in Madame's apartment."

"Why is he with Madame?"

"Madame is troubled with nervous attacks."

"A very fine disorder, indeed!" said the queen. "M. Vallot is wrong in being there, when another physician might cure Madame."

Madame de Motteville looked up with an air of great surprise, as she replied, "Another doctor instead of M. Vallot! Who, then?"

"Occupation, Motteville, occupation! Ah! if any one is really ill, it is my poor daughter."

"And your Majesty too."

"Less so this evening, though."

"Do not believe that too confidently, Madame," said De Motteville.

As if to justify the caution, a sharp pain seized the queen, who turned deadly pale, and threw herself back in the chair, with every symptom of a sudden fainting-fit. "My drops!" she murmured.

"Ah! ah!" replied Molina, who went without haste to a richly gilded tortoise-shell cabinet, from which she took a large rock-crystal smelling-bottle, and brought it, open, to the queen, who inhaled from it wildly several times, and murmured, "In that way the Lord will kill me; his holy will be done!"

"Your Majesty's death is not so near at hand," added Molina, replacing the smelling-bottle in the cabinet.

"Does your Majesty feel better now?" inquired Madame de Motteville.

"Much better," returned the queen, placing her finger on her lips, to impose silence on her favorite.

"It is very strange," remarked Madame de Motteville, after a pause.

"What is strange?" said the queen.

"Does your Majesty remember the day when this pain attacked you for the first time?"

"I remember only that it was a grievously sad day for me, Motteville."

"But your Majesty had not always regarded that day as a sad one."

"Why?"

"Because twenty-three years before, on that very day, his present Majesty, your own glorious son, was born at the very same hour."

The queen uttered a loud cry, buried her face in her hands, and seemed utterly lost for some moments. Was it remembrance or reflection, or was it grief? La Molina darted a look at Madame de Motteville almost furious in its reproachfulness. The poor woman, ignorant of its meaning, was about to make inquiries in her own defence, when suddenly Anne of Austria arose and said: "Yes, the 5th of September; my sorrow began on the 5th of September. The greatest joy, one day; the deepest sorrow, the next, — the sorrow," she added in a low voice, "the bitter expiation of a too excessive joy."

And from that moment Anne of Austria, whose memory and reason seemed to have become entirely suspended for a time, remained impenetrable, with vacant look, mind almost wandering, and hands hanging heavily down, as if life had almost departed.

"We must put her to bed," said La Molina.

"Presently, Molina."

"Let us leave the queen alone," added the Spanish attendant.

Madame de Motteville rose. Large and glistening tears were fast rolling down the queen's pallid face; and Molina, having observed this sign of weakness, fixed her vigilant black eyes upon her.

"Yes, yes," replied the queen. "Leave us, Motteville; go!"

The word "us" produced a disagreeable effect upon the ears of the French favorite; for it signified that an interchange of secrets or of revelations of the past was about

to be made, and that one person was *de trop* in the conversation which seemed likely to take place.

"Will Molina be sufficient for your Majesty to-night?" inquired the Frenchwoman.

"Yes," replied the queen.

Madame de Motteville bowed in submission, and was about to withdraw, when suddenly an old female attendant, dressed as if she had belonged to the Spanish Court of the year 1620, opened the door and surprised the queen in her tears, Madame de Motteville in her skilful retreat, and Molina in her strategy. "The remedy!" she cried delightedly to the queen, as she unceremoniously approached the group.

"What remedy, *Chica?*" said Anne of Austria.

"For your Majesty's sufferings," the former replied.

"Who brings it?" asked Madame de Motteville, eagerly, — "M. Vallot?"

"No; a lady from Flanders."

"From Flanders? Is she Spanish?" inquired the queen.

"I don't know."

"Who sent her?"

"M. Colbert."

"Her name?"

"She did not mention it."

"Her position in life?"

"She will answer that herself."

"Her face?"

"She is masked."

"Go, Molina; go and see!" cried the queen.

"It is needless," suddenly replied a voice, at once firm and gentle in its tone, which proceeded from the other side of the tapestry hangings, — a voice which startled the attendants and made the queen tremble. At the same moment a woman, masked, appeared between the curtains, and before the queen could speak added, "I am connected

with the order of the Béguines of Bruges, and do indeed bring with me the remedy which is certain to effect a cure of your Majesty's complaint."

No one uttered a sound, and the Béguine did not move a step.

"Speak!" said the queen.

"I will when we are alone," was the answer.

Anne of Austria looked at her attendants, who immediately withdrew. The Béguine thereupon advanced a few steps towards the queen, and bowed reverently before her. The queen gazed with increasing mistrust at this woman, who in her turn fixed a pair of brilliant eyes upon the queen through openings in the mask.

"The Queen of France must indeed be very ill," said Anne of Austria, "if it is known at the Béguinage of Bruges that she stands in need of being cured."

"Your Majesty, thank God, is not ill beyond remedy."

"But, tell me, how do you happen to know that I am suffering?"

"Your Majesty has friends in Flanders."

"And these friends have sent you?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Name them to me."

"Impossible, Madame, since your Majesty's memory has not been awakened by your heart."

Anne of Austria looked up, endeavoring to discover through the concealment of the mask and through her mysterious language the name of this person who expressed herself with such familiarity and freedom; then suddenly, wearied by a curiosity at odds with her pride, she said, "You are ignorant, perhaps, that royal personages are never spoken to with the face masked."

"Deign to excuse me, Madame," replied the Béguine, humbly.

"I cannot excuse you; I will not forgive you if you do not throw your mask aside."

"I have made a vow, Madame, to go to the help of those who are afflicted or suffering, without ever permitting them to behold my face. I might have been able to administer some relief to your body and to your mind; but since your Majesty forbids me, I will take my leave. Adieu, Madame, adieu!"

These words were uttered with a harmony of tone and respect of manner that destroyed the queen's anger and suspicion, but did not remove her feeling of curiosity. "You are right," she said; "it ill becomes those who are suffering to reject the means of relief which Heaven sends them. Speak, then; and may you indeed be able, as you assert you are, to administer relief to my body. Alas! I think that God is about to make it suffer."

"Let us first speak a little of the mind, if you please," said the Béguine, — "of the mind, which I am sure must also suffer."

"My mind?"

"There are cancers so insidious in their nature that their very pulsation is invisible. Such cancers, Madame, leave the ivory whiteness of the skin untouched, and marble not the firm, fair flesh with their blue tints; the physician who bends over the patient's chest hears not, though he listens, the insatiable teeth of the disease grinding its onward progress through the muscles, as the blood flows freely on; neither iron nor fire has ever destroyed or disarmed the rage of these mortal scourges; their home is in the mind, which they corrupt; they grow in the heart until it breaks. Such, Madame, are these other cancers, fatal to queens: are you free from these evils?"

Anne slowly raised her arm, as dazzling in its perfect

whiteness and as pure in its rounded outlines as it was in the time of her earlier days. "The evils to which you allude," she said, "are the condition of the lives of the high in rank upon earth, to whom Heaven has imparted mind. When those evils become too heavy to be borne, the Lord lightens their burden by penitence and confession. Thus we lay down our burden, and the secrets which oppress us. But forget not that the same sovereign Lord apportions their trials to the strength of his creatures; and my strength is not inferior to my burden. For the secrets of others I have enough of the mercy of Heaven; for my own secrets not so much mercy as my confessor."

"I find you, Madame, as courageous as ever against your enemies; I do not find you showing confidence in your friends."

"Queens have no friends. If you have nothing further to say to me, if you feel yourself inspired by Heaven as a prophetess, leave me, I pray; for I dread the future."

"I should have supposed," said the Béguine, resolutely, "that you would rather dread the past."

Hardly had these words escaped the Béguine's lips, when the queen rose proudly. "Speak!" she cried, in a short, imperious tone of voice; "explain yourself briefly, quickly, entirely; or, if not —"

"Nay, do not threaten me, your Majesty!" said the Béguine, gently. "I have come to you full of compassion and respect; I have come on the part of a friend."

"Prove it, then! Comfort, instead of irritating me."

"Easily enough; and your Majesty will see who is friendly to you. What misfortune has happened to your Majesty during these twenty-three years past?"

"Serious misfortunes, indeed! Have I not lost the king?"

"I speak not of misfortunes of that kind. I wish to ask

you if, since — the birth of the king, — any indiscretion on a friend's part has caused your Majesty distress?"

"I do not understand you," replied the queen, setting her teeth hard together in order to conceal her emotion.

"I will make myself understood, then. Your Majesty remembers that the king was born on the 5th of September, 1638, at quarter-past eleven o'clock."

"Yes," stammered the queen.

"At half-past twelve," continued the Béguine, "the dauphin, who had been baptized by Monseigneur de Meaux in the king's and in your own presence, was acknowledged as the heir of the crown of France. The king then went to the chapel of the old Château de St. Germain to hear the *Te Deum* chanted."

"Quite true, quite true," murmured the queen.

"Your Majesty's confinement took place in the presence of Monsieur, his Majesty's late uncle, of the princes, and of the ladies attached to the court. The king's physician, Bouvard, and Honoré, the surgeon, were stationed in the antechamber; your Majesty slept from three o'clock until seven, I believe?"

"Yes, yes; but you tell me no more than every one else knows as well as you and myself."

"I am now, Madame, approaching that with which very few persons are acquainted. Very few persons, did I say? Alas! I might say two only; for formerly there were but five in all, and for many years past the secret has been assured by the deaths of the principal participators in it. The late king sleeps now with his ancestors; Péronne, the midwife, soon followed him; Laporte is already forgotten."

The queen opened her lips as though about to reply; she felt beneath her icy hand, with which she touched her face, the beads of perspiration upon her brow.

"It was eight o'clock," pursued the Béguine. "The king was seated at supper, full of joy and happiness; around him on all sides arose wild cries of delight and drinking of healths; the people cheered beneath the balconies; the Swiss Guards, the Musketeers, and the Royal Guards wandered through the city, borne about in triumph by the drunken students. Those boisterous sounds of the general joy disturbed the dauphin, the future king of France, who was quietly lying in the arms of Madame de Hausac, his nurse, and whose eyes, when he should open them, might have observed two crowns at the foot of his cradle. Suddenly your Majesty uttered a piercing cry, and Dame Péronne immediately flew to your bedside.

"The doctors were dining in a room at some distance from your chamber; the palace, abandoned in the general confusion, was without either sentinels or guards. The midwife, having questioned and examined your Majesty, gave a sudden exclamation of surprise, and taking you in her arms, bewildered, almost out of her senses from sheer distress of mind, despatched Laporte to inform the king that her Majesty the Queen wished to see him in her room.

"Laporte, you are aware, Madame, was a man of the most admirable calmness and presence of mind. He did not approach the king as if he were the bearer of alarming intelligence and feeling his importance wished to inspire the terror which he himself experienced; besides, it was not a very terrifying intelligence which awaited the king. At any rate, Laporte, with a smile upon his lips, approached the king's chair, saying to him, 'Sire, the queen is very happy, and would be still more so to see your Majesty.'

"On that day Louis XIII. would have given his crown away to the veriest beggar for a 'God bless you.' Ani-

mated, light-hearted, and full of gayety, the king rose from the table, and said to those around him, in a tone that Henry IV. might have used, 'Gentlemen, I am going to see my wife.' He came to your bedside, Madame, at the very moment when Dame Péronne presented to him a second prince, as beautiful and healthy as the former, and said, 'Sire, Heaven will not allow the kingdom of France to fall into the female line.' The king, yielding to a first impulse, clasped the child in his arms, and cried, 'Oh, Heaven, I thank thee!'"

At this part of her recital the Béguine paused, observing how intensely the queen was suffering. She had thrown herself back in her chair, and with her head bent forward and her eyes fixed, listened without seeming to hear, and her lips moved convulsively, breathing either a prayer to Heaven or imprecations against the woman before her.

"Ah! do not believe that if there has been but one dauphin in France," exclaimed the Béguine, "if the queen allowed the second child to vegetate far from the throne, — do not believe that she was an unfeeling mother. Oh, no, no! There are those who know the floods of bitter tears she shed; there are those who have known and witnessed the passionate kisses she imprinted on that innocent creature in exchange for the life of misery and gloom to which State policy condemned the twin brother of Louis XIV."

"Oh, Heaven!" murmured the queen, feebly.

"It is known," continued the Béguine, quickly, "that when the king perceived the effect which would result from the existence of two sons, both equal in age and pretensions, he trembled for the welfare of France, for the tranquillity of the State. It is known that the Cardinal de Richelieu, by the direction of Louis XIII., thought over the subject with deep attention, and after an hour's

meditation in his Majesty's cabinet pronounced the following sentence: 'A king is born, to succeed his Majesty. God has sent another, to succeed the first; but at present we need only the first-born. Let us conceal the second from France, as God has concealed him from his parents themselves. One prince is peace and safety for the State; two competitors are civil war and anarchy.'"

The queen rose suddenly from her seat, pale as death, her hands clinched together. "You know too much," she said in a hoarse, thick voice, "since you refer to secrets of State. As for the friends from whom you have acquired this secret, they are false and treacherous. You are their accomplice in the crime which is now committed. Now, throw aside your mask, or I will have you arrested by my captain of the Guards. Do not think that this secret terrifies me! You have obtained it; you shall restore it to me. It will freeze in your bosom; neither your secret nor your life belongs to you from this moment."

Anne of Austria, joining gesture to the threat, advanced two steps towards the Béguine. "Learn," said the latter, "to know and value the fidelity, the honor, and the secrecy of the friends you have abandoned." She then suddenly threw aside her mask.

"Madame de Chevreuse!" exclaimed the queen.

"With your Majesty, the sole living confidante of the secret."

"Ah," murmured Anne of Austria, "come and embrace me, Duchess! Alas! you kill your friend in thus trifling with her terrible distress."

The queen, leaning her head upon the shoulder of the old duchess, burst into a flood of bitter tears. "How young you are still!" said the latter, in a hollow voice; "you can weep!"

CHAPTER LI.

TWO FRIENDS.

The queen looked steadily at Madame de Chevreuse, and said: "I believe you just now made use of the word 'happy' in speaking of me. Hitherto, Duchess, I had thought it impossible that a human creature could anywhere be found less happy than the Queen of France."

"Your afflictions, Madame, have indeed been terrible enough; but by the side of those illustrious misfortunes to which we, two old friends separated by men's malice, were just now alluding, you possess sources of pleasure, slight enough in themselves it may be, but which are greatly envied by the world."

"What are they?" said Anne of Austria, bitterly. "How can you use the word 'pleasure,' Duchess, — you who just now admitted that my body and my mind both are in need of remedies?"

Madame de Chevreuse collected herself for a moment, and then murmured, "How far removed kings are from other people!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they are so far removed from the vulgar herd that they forget that others ever stand in need of the bare necessaries of life. They are like the inhabitant of the African mountain who gazing from the verdant table-land, refreshed by the rills of melted snow, cannot comprehend that the dwellers in the plains below him are perishing from hunger and thirst in the midst of their lands burned up by the heat of the sun."

The queen slightly colored, for she now began to perceive the drift of her friend's remark. "It was very wrong," she said, "to have neglected you."

"Oh, Madame, the king has inherited, it is said, the hatred his father bore me. The king would dismiss me if he knew I were in the Palais-Royal."

"I cannot say that the king is very well disposed towards you, Duchess," replied the queen; "but I could — secretly, you know — " The duchess's disdainful smile produced a feeling of uneasiness in the queen's mind. "Duchess," she hastened to add, "you did perfectly right to come here."

"Thanks, Madame."

"Even were it only to give us the happiness of contradicting the report of your death."

"Has it been said, then, that I was dead?"

"Everywhere."

"And yet my children did not go into mourning."

"Ah! you know, Duchess, the court is very frequently moving about from place to place; we see the gentlemen of Albert de Luynes but seldom, and many things escape our minds in the midst of the preoccupations which constantly engage us."

"Your Majesty ought not to have believed the report of my death."

"Why not? Alas! we are all mortal; and you may perceive how rapidly I — your younger sister, as we used formerly to say — am approaching the tomb."

"If your Majesty had believed me dead, you ought to have been astonished not to have received any communication from me."

"Death not unfrequently takes us by surprise, Duchess."

"Oh, your Majesty, those who are burdened with secrets such as we have just now discussed have always

an urgent desire to divulge them, which they must gratify before they die. Among the preparations for eternity is the task of putting one's papers in order." The queen started. "Your Majesty will be sure to learn in a particular manner the day of my death."

"Why so?"

"Because your Majesty will receive the next day, under several coverings, everything connected with our mysterious correspondence of former times."

"Did you not burn it?" cried Anne, in alarm.

"Traitors only," replied the duchess, "destroy a royal correspondence."

"Traitors, do you say?"

"Yes, certainly; or rather they pretend to destroy, and keep or sell it. The faithful, on the contrary, most carefully secrete such treasures; for it may happen that some day or other they will wish to seek out their queen in order to say to her: 'Madame, I am getting old; my health is fast failing me. For me there is danger of death; for your Majesty, the danger that this secret may be revealed. Take, therefore, this dangerous paper, and burn it yourself.'"

"A dangerous paper? What one?"

"So far as I am concerned, I have but one, it is true; but that is indeed most dangerous in its nature."

"Oh, Duchess, tell me, tell me!"

"A letter dated Tuesday, the 2d of August, 1644, in which you beg me to go to Noisy-le-Sec to see that unhappy child. In your own handwriting, Madame, there are those words, 'that unhappy child!'"

A profound silence ensued. The queen's mind was wandering in the past; Madame de Chevreuse was watching the progress of her scheme. "Yes, unhappy, most unhappy!" murmured Anne of Austria; "how sad the

existence he led, poor child, to finish it in so cruel a manner!"

"Is he dead?" cried the duchess, suddenly, with a curiosity whose sincere accents the queen instinctively detected.

"He died of consumption, died forgotten, died withered and blighted like the flowers a lover has given to his mistress, which she leaves to die secreted in a drawer where she has hidden them from the world."

"Died?" repeated the duchess, with an air of discouragement which would have afforded the queen the most unfeigned delight had it not been tempered in some measure by a mixture of doubt. "Died — at Noisy-le-Sec?"

"Yes, in the arms of his tutor, — a poor, honest man who did not long survive him."

"That can be easily understood. It is so difficult to bear up under the weight of such a loss and such a secret," said Madame de Chevreuse, the irony of which reflection the queen pretended not to perceive. Madame de Chevreuse continued: "Well, Madame, I inquired some years ago at Noisy-le-Sec about this unhappy child. I was told that it was not believed he was dead; and that was my reason for not at once condoling with your Majesty. Oh, certainly, if I had believed it, never should the slightest allusion to so deplorable an event have reawakened your Majesty's legitimate distress."

"You say that it is not believed that the child died at Noisy?"

"No, Madame."

"What did they say about him, then?"

"They said — But no doubt they were mistaken."

"Nay, speak, speak!"

"They said that one evening about the year 1645 a lady, beautiful and majestic in her bearing, which was

observed notwithstanding the mask and the mantle which concealed her figure, — a lady of rank, of very high rank no doubt, — came in a carriage to the place where the road branches off, — the very same spot, you know, where I awaited news of the young prince when your Majesty was graciously pleased to send me there."

"Well, well?"

"That the boy's tutor, or guardian, took the child to this lady."

"Well, what next?"

"That both the child and his tutor left that part of the country the very next day."

"There! you see there is some truth in what you relate, since in point of fact the poor child died from a sudden attack of illness, which up to the age of seven years makes the lives of all children, as doctors say, suspended as it were by a thread."

"What your Majesty says is quite true. No one knows it better than you; no one believes it more than myself. But yet how strange it is — "

"What can it now be?" thought the queen.

"The person who gave me these details, who had been sent to inquire after the child's health — "

"Did you confide such a charge to any one else? Oh, Duchess!"

"Some one as dumb as your Majesty, as dumb as myself; we will suppose it was myself, Madame. This 'some one,' some months after, passing through Touraine — "

"Touraine!"

"Recognized both the tutor and the child too! I am wrong; he thought he recognized them, both living, cheerful, happy, and flourishing, — the one in a green old age, the other in the flower of his youth. Judge, after that, what truth can be attributed to the rumors which

are circulated, or what faith, after that, can be placed in anything that may happen in the world. But I am fatiguing your Majesty; it was not my intention, however, to do so; and I will take my leave of you, after renewing to you the assurance of my most respectful devotion."

"Stay, Duchess! Let us first talk a little about yourself."

"Of myself, Madame? I am not worthy that you should bend your looks upon me."

"Why not, indeed? Are you not the oldest friend I have? Are you angry with me, Duchess?"

"I, indeed! What motive could I have? If I had reason to be angry with your Majesty, should I have come here?"

"Duchess, age is fast creeping on us both; we should be united against that death whose approach cannot be far off."

"You overpower me, Madame, with the kindness of your language."

"No one has ever loved or served me as you have done, Duchess."

"Your Majesty remembers it?"

"Always. Duchess, give me a proof of your friendship."

"Ah, Madame, my whole being is devoted to your Majesty."

"The proof I require is that you should ask something of me."

"Ask —"

"Oh, I know you well, — no one is more disinterested, more noble, more truly royal."

"Do not praise me too highly, Madame," said the duchess, becoming uneasy.

"I could never praise you as much as you deserve to be praised."

"And yet, age and misfortune effect a great change in people, Madame."

"So much the better; for the beautiful, the haughty, the adored duchess of former days might have answered me ungratefully, 'I do not wish for anything from you.' Blessed be misfortunes, if they have come to you, since they will have changed you, and you will now perhaps answer me, 'I accept.'"

The duchess's look and smile became more gentle; she was under the charm, and no longer concealed her wishes.

"Speak, dearest!" said the queen; "what do you want?"

"I must first explain to you —"

"Do so unhesitatingly."

"Well, then, your Majesty can confer on me a pleasure unspeakable, a pleasure incomparable."

"What is it?" said the queen, a little distant in her manner, from an uneasiness of feeling produced by this remark. "But do not forget, my good Chevreuse, that I am quite as much under my son's influence as I was formerly under my husband's."

"I will not be too hard, Madame."

"Call me as you used to do; it will be a sweet echo of our happy youth."

"Well, then, my dear mistress, my darling Anne —"

"Do you know Spanish still?"

"Yes."

"Ask me in Spanish, then."

"Here it is: Will your Majesty do me the honor to pass a few days with me at Dampierre?"

"Is that all?" said the queen, stupefied.

"Yes."

"Nothing more than that?"

"Good heavens! Can you possibly imagine that in asking you that, I am not asking you the greatest conceivable favor? If that really be the case, you do not know me. Will you accept?"

"Yes, gladly. And I shall be happy," continued the queen, with some suspicion, "if my presence can in any way be useful to you."

"Useful," exclaimed the duchess, laughing, — "oh, no, no! agreeable, delicious, delightful, — yes, a thousand times yes! You promise me, then?"

"I swear it," said the queen, whereupon the duchess seized her beautiful hand and covered it with kisses. The queen could not help murmuring to herself, "She is a good-hearted woman, and very generous too."

"Will your Majesty consent to wait a fortnight before you come?"

"Certainly; but why?"

"Because," said the duchess, "knowing me to be in disgrace, no one would lend me the hundred thousand crowns which I require to put Dampierre in a state of repair. But when it is known that I require that sum for the purpose of receiving your Majesty at Dampierre properly, all the money in Paris will be at my disposal."

"Ah!" said the queen, gently nodding her head with an air of intelligence, "a hundred thousand crowns! you want a hundred thousand crowns to put Dampierre into repair?"

"Quite as much as that."

"And no one will lend them to you?"

"No one."

"I will lend them to you, if you like, Duchess."

"Oh, I hardly dare accept such a sum!"

"You would be wrong if you did not. Besides, a hun-

dred thousand crowns is really not much. I know but too well that your discreetness has never been properly acknowledged. Push that table a little towards me, Duchess, and I will write you an order on M. Colbert, — no, on M. Fouquet, who is a far more courteous and obliging man."

"Will he pay it?"

"If he will not pay it, I will; but it will be the first time he will have refused me."

The queen wrote and handed the duchess the order, and afterwards dismissed her with a warm and cheerful embrace.

CHAPTER LII.

HOW JEAN DE LA FONTAINE WROTE HIS FIRST TALE.

ALL these intrigues are exhausted; the human mind, so complicated in its exhibitions, has developed itself freely in the three outlines which our recital has afforded. It is not unlikely that in the future we are now preparing, politics and intrigues may still appear; but the springs by which they work will be so carefully concealed that no one will be able to see aught but flowers and paintings, — just as at a theatre, where a Colossus appears upon the scene walking along moved by the small legs and slender arms of a child concealed within the framework.

We now return to St. Mandé, where the superintendent was in the habit of receiving his select society of epicureans. For some time past the host had been severely tried. Every one in the house was aware of and felt the minister's distress. No more magnificent and recklessly improvident *réunions!* Finance had been the pretext assigned by Fouquet; and never was any pretext, as Gourville wittily said, more fallacious, for there was not the slightest appearance of money.

M. Vatel was most resolutely painstaking in keeping up the reputation of the house, and yet the gardeners who supplied the kitchens complained of a ruinous delay. The agents for the supply of Spanish wines frequently sent drafts which no one honored; fishermen, whom the superintendent engaged on the coast of Normandy, calculated that if they were paid all that was due to them, the

amount would enable them to retire comfortably for the rest of their lives; fish, which at a later period was to be the cause of Vatel's death, did not arrive at all. However, on the ordinary day of reception, Fouquet's friends flocked in more numerously than ever. Gourville and the Abbé Fouquet talked over money matters, — that is to say, the abbé borrowed a few pistoles from Gourville. Pellisson, seated with his legs crossed, was engaged in finishing the peroration of a speech with which Fouquet was to open the parliament; and this speech was a masterpiece, because Pellisson wrote it for his friend, — that is to say, he inserted everything in it which the latter would most certainly never have taken the trouble to say of his own accord. Presently Loret and La Fontaine would enter from the garden, engaged in a dispute upon the facility of making verses. The painters and musicians, in their turn, also were hovering near the dining-room. As soon as eight o'clock struck, the supper would be announced; for the superintendent never kept any one waiting. It was already half-past seven, and the guests were in good appetite.

As soon as all the guests were assembled, Gourville went straight up to Pellisson, awoke him out of his reverie, and led him into the middle of a room the doors of which he had closed. "Well," he said, "anything new?"

Pellisson raised his intelligent and gentle face, and said, "I have borrowed twenty-five thousand livres of my aunt, and I have them here in good money."

"Good!" replied Gourville; "we want only one hundred and ninety-five thousand livres for the first payment."

"The payment of what?" asked La Fontaine.

"What! absent-minded as usual? Why, it was you who told us that the small estate at Corbeil was going to be sold by one of M. Fouquet's creditors; and you, also, who proposed that all his friends should subscribe. More

than that, too, it was you who said that you would sell a corner of your house at Château-Thierry in order to furnish your own proportion; and you now come and ask, '*The payment of what*'?"

This remark was received with a general laugh, which made La Fontaine blush. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I had not forgotten it, — oh, no! only —"

"Only you remembered nothing about it," replied Loret.

"That is the truth; and the fact is, he is quite right. There is a great difference between forgetting and not remembering."

"Well, then," added Pellisson, "you bring your mite in the shape of the price of the piece of land you have sold?"

"Sold? no!"

"And have you not sold the field, then?" inquired Gourville, in astonishment, for he knew the poet's disinterestedness.

"My wife would not let me," replied the latter, at which there were fresh bursts of laughter.

"And yet you went to Château-Thierry for that purpose," said some one.

"Certainly I did, and on horseback."

"Poor fellow!"

"I had eight different horses, and I was almost jolted to death."

"You are an excellent fellow! And you rested yourself when you arrived there!"

"Rested! Oh! of course I did, for I had an immense deal of work to do."

"How so?"

"My wife had been flirting with the man to whom I wished to sell the land. The fellow drew back from his bargain, and so I challenged him."

"Very good; and you fought?"

"It seems not."

"You know nothing about it, I suppose?"

"No; my wife and her relations interfered in the matter. I was kept a quarter of an hour with my sword in my hand; but I was not wounded."

"And the adversary?"

"Neither was the adversary, for he never came on to the field."

"Capital!" cried his friends, from all sides; "you must have been terribly angry."

"Exceedingly so; I had caught cold. I returned home, and then my wife began to quarrel with me."

"In real earnest?"

"Yes, in real earnest; she threw a loaf of bread at my head, a large loaf."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh! I upset the table over her and her guests; and then I got upon my horse again, and here I am."

Every one had great difficulty in keeping his countenance at the relation of this tragic comedy; and when the laughter had somewhat ceased, one of the guests present said to him, "Is that all you have brought us back?"

"Oh, no! I have an excellent idea in my head."

"What is it?"

"Have you noticed that there is a good deal of sportive, jesting poetry written in France?"

"Yes, of course," replied every one.

"And," pursued La Fontaine, "only a very small portion of it is printed."

"The laws are strict, you know."

"That may be; but a rare article is a dear article, and that is the reason why I have written a small poem extremely licentious."

"Oh, oh, dear poet!"

"Extremely obscene."

"Oh! oh!"

"Extremely cynical."

"Oh, the devil!"

"Yes," continued the poet, with cold indifference; "I have introduced in it the greatest freedom of language I could possibly employ."

Peals of laughter again broke forth, while the poet was thus announcing the quality of his wares. "And," he continued, "I have tried to exceed everything that Boccaccio, Arétin, and other masters of their craft have written in the same style."

"Good God!" cried Pellisson, "it will be condemned!"

"Do you think so?" said La Fontaine, simply. "I assure you, I did not do it on my own account so much as on M. Fouquet's."

This wonderful conclusion raised the mirth of all present to a climax.

"And I have sold the first edition of this little book for eight hundred livres," exclaimed La Fontaine, rubbing his hands together. "Serious and religious books sell at about half that rate."

"It would have been better," said Gourville, laughing; "to have written two religious books instead!"

"It would have been too long, and not amusing enough," replied La Fontaine, tranquilly. "My eight hundred livres are in this little bag; I offer them as my contribution."

As he said this, he placed his offering in the hands of their treasurer. It was then Loret's turn, who gave a hundred and fifty livres. The others stripped themselves in the same way; and the total sum in the purse amounted to forty thousand livres. Never did more generous coins

rattle in the divine balances in which charity weighs good hearts and good intentions against the counterfeit coin of devout hypocrites.

The money was still being counted over when the superintendent noiselessly entered the room. He had heard everything. This man, who had possessed so many millions, who had exhausted all pleasures and all honors, — this generous heart, this inexhaustible brain, — Fouquet, who had, like two burning crucibles, devoured the material and moral substance of the first kingdom in the world, crossed the threshold with his eyes filled with tears, and passed his white and slender fingers through the gold and silver. "Poor offering," he said, in a tone tender and filled with emotion, "you will disappear in the smallest corner of my empty purse; but you have filled to overflowing that which nothing can ever exhaust, — my heart. Thank you, my friends, — thank you!" And as he could not embrace every one present, — all were weeping a little, philosophers though they were, — he embraced La Fontaine, saying to him, "Poor fellow! so you have on my account been beaten by your wife and damned by your confessor?"

"Oh, it is a mere nothing!" replied the poet. "If your creditors will only wait a couple of years, I shall have written a hundred other tales, which at two editions each will pay off the debt."

CHAPTER LIII.

LA FONTAINE AS A NEGOTIATOR.

FOUQUET pressed La Fontaine's hand most warmly, saying to him, "My dear poet, write a hundred other tales, not only for the eighty pistoles which each of them will produce you, but still more to enrich our language with a hundred other masterpieces."

"Oh! oh!" said La Fontaine, with a little air of pride, "you must not suppose that I have brought only this idea and the eighty pistoles to the superintendent."

"Oh! indeed!" was the general acclamation from all parts of the room; "M. de la Fontaine is in funds to-day."

"Heaven bless the idea, if it brings me one or two millions," said Fouquet, gayly.

"Exactly," replied La Fontaine.

"Quick, quick!" cried the assembly.

"Take care!" said Pellisson in La Fontaine's ear. "You have had a most brilliant success up to the present moment; do not go too far."

"Not at all, M. Pellisson; and you, who are a man of taste, will be the first to approve of what I have done."

"Is it a matter of millions?" said Gourville.

"I have fifteen hundred thousand livres here, M. Gourville," he replied, striking himself on the chest.

"The deuce take this Gascon from Château-Thierry!" cried Loret.

"It is not the pocket you should touch, but the brain," said Fouquet.

"Stay a moment, Monsieur the Superintendent!" added La Fontaine; "you are not procureur-général,—you are a poet."

"True, true!" cried Loret, Conrart, and every person present connected with literature.

"You are, I repeat, a poet and a painter, a sculptor, a friend of the arts and sciences; but acknowledge that you are no lawyer."

"Oh, I do acknowledge it!" replied M. Fouquet, smiling.

"If you were to be nominated at the Academy, you would refuse, I think."

"I think I should, with all due deference to the academicians."

"Very good; if therefore you do not wish to belong to the Academy, why do you allow yourself to form one of the parliament?"

"Oh! oh!" said Pellisson; "we are talking politics."

"I wish to know," persisted La Fontaine, "whether the barrister's gown does or does not become M. Fouquet."

"There is no question of the gown at all," retorted Pellisson, annoyed at the laughter of the company.

"On the contrary, the gown is in question," said Loret.

"Take the gown away from the procureur-général," said Conrart, "and we have M. Fouquet left, us still, of whom we have no reason to complain; but as he is no procureur-général without his gown, we agree with M. de la Fontaine, and pronounce the gown to be nothing but a bugbear."

"*Fugiunt risus leporesque*," said Loret.

"The smiles and the graces," said some one present.

"That is not the way," said Pellisson, gravely, "that I translate *lepores*."

"How do you translate it?" said La Fontaine.

"Thus: 'The hares run away as soon as they see M. Fouquet.'"

A burst of laughter, in which the superintendent joined, followed this sally.

"But why hares?" objected Conrart, vexed.

"Because the hare will be the very one who will not be over-pleased to see M. Fouquet retaining the elements of strength which belong to his parliamentary position."

"Oh! oh!" murmured the poets.

"*Quo non ascendam*," said Conrart, "would seem to me impossible with a procureur's gown."

"And it seems so to me without that gown," said the obstinate Pellisson. "What is your opinion, Gourville?"

"I think the gown in question is a very good thing," replied the latter; "but I equally think that a million and a half is far better than the gown."

"And I am of Gourville's opinion," exclaimed Fouquet, stopping the discussion by the expression of his own opinion, which would necessarily bear down all the others.

"A million and a half!" Pellisson grumbled out. "Now I happen to know an Indian fable —"

"Tell it to me," said La Fontaine; "I ought to know it too."

"Tell it, tell it!" said the others.

"There was a tortoise which was as usual well protected by its shell," said Pellisson. "Whenever its enemies threatened it, it took refuge within its covering. One day some one said to it, 'You must feel very hot in such a house as that in the summer, and you are altogether prevented from showing off your graces; here is a snake who will give you a million and a half for your shell.'"

"Good!" said the superintendent, laughing.

"Well, what next?" said La Fontaine, much more interested in the apologue than in its moral.

"The tortoise sold his shell, and remained naked and defenceless. A vulture happened to see him, and being hungry broke the tortoise's back with a blow of his beak and devoured it. The moral is that M. Fouquet should take very good care to keep his gown."

La Fontaine understood the moral seriously. "You forget Æschylus," he said to his adversary.

"What do you mean?"

"Æschylus was bald-headed; and a vulture — your vulture probably — who was a great lover of tortoises mistook at a distance his head for a block of stone, and let a tortoise which was shrunk up in his shell fall upon it."

"Yes, yes, La Fontaine is right," resumed Fouquet, who had become very thoughtful. "Whenever a vulture wishes to devour a tortoise, he well knows how to break his shell; and but too happy is that tortoise to which a snake pays a million and a half for his envelope. If any one were to bring me a generous-hearted snake like the one in your fable, Pellisson, I would give him my shell."

"*Rara avis in terris!*" cried Conrart.

"And like a black swan, is he not?" added La Fontaine; "well, then, the bird in question, black and very rare, is already found."

"Do you mean to say that you have found a purchaser for my post of procureur-général?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"I have, Monsieur."

"But the superintendent has never said that he wished to sell," resumed Pellisson.

"I beg your pardon," said Conrart; "you yourself spoke about it —"

"Yes, I am a witness to that," said Gourville.

"He seems very tenacious about his brilliant idea," said Fouquet, laughing. "Well, La Fontaine, who is the purchaser?"

"A perfect black bird, a counsellor belonging to the parliament, an excellent fellow."

"What is his name?"

"Vanel."

"Vanel!" exclaimed Fouquet, — "Vanel, the husband of —"

"Precisely, — her husband; yes, Monsieur."

"Poor fellow!" said Fouquet, with an expression of great interest; "he wishes to be procureur-général?"

"He wishes to be everything that you have been, Monsieur," said Gourville, "and to do everything that you have done."

"It is very agreeable; tell us all about it, La Fontaine."

"It is very simple. I see him occasionally; and a short time ago I met him walking about on the Place de la Bastille, at the very moment when I was about to take the small carriage to come down here to St. Mandé."

"He must have been watching his wife," interrupted Loret.

"Oh, no!" said La Fontaine; "he is far from being jealous. He accosted me, embraced me, and took me to the inn called L'Image-Saint-Fiacre, and told me all about his troubles."

"He has his troubles, then?"

"Yes; his wife wants to make him ambitious."

"Well, and he told you —"

"That some one had spoken to him about a post in parliament; that M. Fouquet's name had been mentioned; that ever since, Madame Vanel dreams of nothing else but being called Madame the Procureuse-Générale, and that she is dying of it every night she is not dreaming of it."

"The deuce!"

"Poor woman!" said Fouquet.

"Wait a moment! Conrart is always telling me that I

do not know how to conduct matters of business; you will see how I manage this one."

"Well, go on!"

"'I suppose you know,' said I to Vanel, 'that the value of a post such as that which M. Fouquet holds is by no means trifling.' 'How much do you imagine it to be?' he said. 'M. Fouquet, I know, has refused seventeen hundred thousand livres.' 'My wife,' replied Vanel, 'had estimated it at about fourteen hundred thousand.' 'Ready money?' I asked. 'Yes; she has sold some property of hers in Guienne, and has received the purchase-money.'"

"That 's a pretty sum to touch all at once," said the Abbé Fouquet, who had not hitherto said a word.

"Poor Madame Vanel!" murmured Fouquet.

Pellisson shrugged his shoulders. "A fiend!" he said in a low voice to Fouquet.

"That may be; it would be delightful to make use of this fiend's money to repair the injury which an angel has done herself for me."

Pellisson looked with a surprised air at Fouquet, whose thoughts were from that moment fixed upon a fresh object.

"Well!" inquired La Fontaine, "what about my negotiation?"

"Admirable, my dear poet!"

"Yes," said Gourville; "but there are some persons who are anxious to have the steed who have not money enough to pay for the bridle."

"And Vanel would draw back from his offer if he were to be taken at his word," continued the Abbé Fouquet.

"I do not believe it," said La Fontaine.

"What do you know about it?"

"Why, you have not yet heard the *dénouement* of my story."

"If there is a *dénouement*, why do you beat about the bush so much?"

"*Semper ad adventum*. Is that correct?" said Fouquet, with the air of a nobleman who condescends to barbarisms. To this the Latinists present answered with loud applause.

"My *dénouement*," cried La Fontaine, "is that Vanel, that determined blackbird, knowing that I was coming to St. Mandé, implored me to bring him with me, and, if possible, to present him to M. Fouquet."

"So that —"

"So that he is here; I left him in that part of the grounds called Bel-Air. Well, M. Fouquet, what is your reply?"

"Well, it is not fitting that the husband of Madame Vanel should catch cold on my grounds. Send for him, La Fontaine, since you know where he is."

"I will go myself."

"And I will accompany you," said the Abbé Fouquet; "I can carry the money-bags."

"No jesting," said Fouquet, seriously; "let the business be a serious one if it is to be one at all. But, first of all, let us be hospitable. Make my apologies, La Fontaine, to that gentleman, and tell him that I am distressed to have kept him waiting, but that I was not aware he was there."

La Fontaine set off at once, fortunately accompanied by Gourville; for absorbed in his own calculations, the poet would have mistaken the route, and was hurrying as fast as he could towards the village of St. Maur.

Within a quarter of an hour afterwards M. Vanel was introduced into the superintendent's cabinet, the description and details of which have already been given at the beginning of this history. When Fouquet saw him enter,

he called Pellisson, and whispered a few words in his ear: "Do not lose a word of what I am going to say. Let all the silver and gold plate, together with the jewels of every description, be packed up in the carriage. You will take the black horses; the jeweller will accompany you; and you will postpone the supper until Madame de Bellière's arrival."

"Will it be necessary to notify Madame de Bellière?" said Pellisson.

"No, that will be useless; I will do that."

"Very well."

"Go, my friend!"

Pellisson set off, not quite clear as to his friend's meaning or intention, but confident, like every true friend, in the judgment of the man he was blindly obeying. It is that which constitutes the strength of such men; distrust is awakened only by inferior natures.

Vanel bowed lowly to the superintendent, and was about to begin a speech.

"Be seated, Monsieur!" said Fouquet, politely. "I am told that you wish to purchase a post I hold. How much can you give me for it?"

"It is for you, Monseigneur, to fix the price. I know that offers of purchase have already been made to you for it."

"Madame Vanel, I have been told, values it at fourteen hundred thousand livres."

"That is all we have."

"Can you give me the money immediately?"

"I have not the money with me," said Vanel, frightened almost by the unpretending simplicity, amounting to greatness, of the man; for he had expected disputes and difficulties, and opposition of every kind.

When will you be able to have it?"

"Whenever you please, Monseigneur;" and he began to be afraid that Fouquet was trifling with him.

"If it were not for the trouble you would have in returning to Paris, I would say at once; but we will arrange that the payment and the signature shall take place at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Very good," said Vanel, as cold as ice, and feeling quite bewildered.

"Adieu, M. Vanel! Present my humblest respects to Madame Vanel," said Fouquet, as he rose; upon which Vanel, who felt the blood rushing up to his head, for he was quite confounded by his success, said seriously to the superintendent, "Will you give me your word, Monseigneur, upon this affair?"

Fouquet turned round his head, saying, "*Pardieu!* and you, Monsieur?"

Vanel hesitated, trembled all over, and at last finished by hesitatingly holding out his hand. Fouquet opened and nobly extended his own. This loyal hand lay for a moment in Vanel's moist, hypocritical palm; and he pressed it in his own, in order the better to convince himself. The superintendent gently disengaged his hand, as he again said, "Adieu." Vanel then ran hastily to the door, hurried along the vestibules, and fled.

CHAPTER LIV.

MADAME DE BELLIÈRE'S PLATE AND DIAMONDS.

When Fouquet had dismissed Vanel, he began to reflect. He said to himself: "A man never can do too much for the woman he has once loved. Marguerite wishes to be the wife of a procureur-général, and why not confer this pleasure upon her? And now that the most scrupulous and sensitive conscience will be unable to reproach me with anything, let my thoughts be bestowed on the woman who loves me. Madame de Bellière ought to be there by this time;" and he turned towards the secret door.

After Fouquet had locked himself in, he opened the subterranean passage, and rapidly hastened towards the means of communicating between the house at Vincennes and his own residence. He had neglected to apprise his friend of his approach by ringing the bell, perfectly assured that she would never fail to be exact at the rendezvous. In fact, the marchioness had arrived, and was waiting. The noise the superintendent made aroused her; she ran to take from under the door the letter which he had thrust there, and which simply said, "Come, Marchioness; we are waiting supper for you." With her heart filled with happiness, Madame de Bellière ran to her carriage in the Avenue de Vincennes; in a few minutes she was holding out her hand to Gourville, who was standing at the entrance, where, in order the better to please his master, he had stationed himself to watch her arrival. She had not observed that Fouquet's black horses had arrived at

the same time, smoking and covered with foam, having returned to St. Mandé with Pellisson and the very jeweller to whom Madame de Bellière had sold her plate and her jewels. Pellisson introduced the goldsmith into the cabinet, which Fouquet had not yet left. The superintendent thanked him for having been good enough to regard as a simple deposit in his hands the valuable property which he had had every right to sell. He cast his eyes on the total of the account, which amounted to thirteen hundred thousand livres. Then, going to his desk, he wrote an order for fourteen hundred thousand livres, payable at sight, at his treasury, before twelve o'clock the next day.

"A hundred thousand livres' profit!" cried the goldsmith. "Oh, Monseigneur, what generosity!"

"Nay, nay, not so, Monsieur," said Fouquet, touching him on the shoulder; "there are certain kindnesses which can never be repaid. The profit is about that which you would have made; but the interest of your money still remains to be arranged;" and saying this, he unfastened from his sleeve a diamond button, which the goldsmith himself had often valued at three thousand pistoles. "Take this," he said to the goldsmith, "in remembrance of me; and farewell! You are an honest man."

"And you, Monseigneur," cried the goldsmith, completely overcome, "are a grand nobleman!"

Fouquet let the worthy goldsmith pass out of the room by a secret door, and then went to receive Madame de Bellière, who was already surrounded by all the guests. The marchioness was always beautiful, but now her loveliness was dazzling.

"Do you not think, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "that Madame is incomparably beautiful this evening? And do you happen to know why?"

"Because Madame is the most beautiful of women," said some one.

"No; but because she is the best. And yet —"

"Yet?" said the marchioness, smiling.

"And yet, all the jewels which Madame is wearing this evening are nothing but false stones."

At this remark the marchioness blushed most painfully.

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed all the guests; "that can very well be said of one who has the finest diamonds in Paris."

"Well?" said Fouquet to Pellisson, in a low tone.

"Well, at last I have understood you," returned the latter; "and you have done well."

"That is pleasant," said the superintendent, with a smile.

"Supper is ready, Monseigneur," said Vatel, with majestic air and tone.

The crowd of guests hurried more rapidly than is customary at ministerial entertainments towards the banqueting-room, where a magnificent spectacle presented itself. Upon the buffets, upon the side-tables, upon the supper-table itself, in the midst of flowers and light, glittered most dazzlingly the richest and most costly gold and silver plate that was ever seen, — relics of those ancient magnificent productions which the Florentine artists, whom the Medici family had patronized, had sculptured, chased, and cast for the purpose of holding flowers, at a time when gold yet existed in France. These hidden marvels, which had been buried during the civil wars, had timidly reappeared during the intervals of that war of good taste called the Fronde, — when noblemen, fighting against noblemen, killed but did not pillage one another. All that plate had Madame de Bellière's arms engraved upon it.

"Look!" cried La Fontaine, "here is a P and a B."

But the most remarkable object present was the cover which Fouquet had assigned to the marchioness. Near her

was a pyramid of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, antique cameos; sardonyx stones, carved by the old Greeks of Asia Minor, with mountings of Mysian gold; curious mosaics of ancient Alexandria, mounted in silver; and massive Egyptian bracelets lay heaped up in a large plate of Palissy ware, supported by a tripod of gilt bronze which had been sculptured by Benvenuto. The marchioness turned pale as she recognized what she had never expected to see again. A profound silence seemed to seize upon every one of the restless and excited guests. Fouquet did not even make a sign in dismissal of the richly liveried servants who crowded like bees round the huge buffets and other tables in the room. "Gentlemen," he said, "all this plate which you behold once belonged to Madame de Bellière, who having observed one of her friends in great distress, sent all this gold and silver, together with the heap of jewels now before her, to her goldsmith. This noble conduct of a devoted friend can well be understood by such friends as you. Happy, indeed, is that man who sees himself loved in such a manner! Let us drink to the health of Madame de Bellière."

A tremendous burst of applause followed his words, and made poor Madame de Bellière sink back dumb and breathless on her seat. "And then," added Pellisson, whom all nobleness aroused and all beauty charmed, "let us also drink to the health of him who inspired Madame's noble conduct; for such a man is worthy of being worthily loved."

It was now the marchioness's turn. She rose, pale and smiling; and as she held out her glass with a faltering hand, and her trembling fingers touched those of Fouquet, her look, full of love, found its reflection and response in that of her ardent and generous-hearted lover.

Begun in this manner, the supper soon became a *fête*.

No one sought for wit, because no one was without it. La Fontaine forgot his Gorgny wine, and allowed Vatel to reconcile him to the wines of the Rhone and those from the shores of Spain. The Abbé Fouquet became so good-natured that Gourville said to him, "Take care, Monsieur the Abbé! If you are so tender, you will be eaten."

The hours passed away so joyously that, contrary to his usual custom, the superintendent did not leave the table before the end of the dessert. He smiled upon his friends, delighted as a man is whose heart becomes intoxicated before his head; and for the first time he looked at the clock. Suddenly a carriage rolled into the courtyard; and, strange to say, it was heard high above the noise of the mirth which prevailed. Fouquet listened attentively, and then turned his eyes towards the antechamber. It seemed as if he could hear a step passing across it, and as if this step, instead of touching the ground, pressed upon his heart. Involuntarily his foot parted company with the foot which Madame de Bellière had rested on his for two hours.

"M. d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes!" the usher announced; and Aramis's grave and thoughtful face appeared in the door-way, between the remains of two garlands, the thread of which the flame of a lamp had just burned.

CHAPTER LV.

M. DE MAZARIN'S RECEIPT.

FOUQUET would have uttered an exclamation of delight on seeing another friend arrive, if the cold air and constrained appearance of Aramis had not restored all his reserve. "Are you going to join us at our dessert?" he asked. "And yet you would be frightened, perhaps, at the noise we madcaps are making."

"Monseigneur," replied Aramis, respectfully, "I will begin by begging you to excuse me for having interrupted this merry meeting; and then I will beg you to give me, after your pleasure, a moment's audience on matters of business."

As the word "business" had aroused the attention of some of the epicureans present, Fouquet rose, saying, "Business first of all, M. d'Herblay; we are too happy when matters of business arrive only at the end of a meal."

As he said this, Fouquet took the hand of Madame de Bellière, who looked at him with a kind of uneasiness, and then led her to an adjoining salon, after having recommended her to the most reasonable of his guests. And then, taking Aramis by the arm, the superintendent led him towards his cabinet.

Aramis, on reaching the cabinet, forgot respect and etiquette; he threw himself into a chair, saying, "Guess whom I have seen this evening?"

"My dear chevalier, every time you begin in that manner I am sure to hear you announce something disagreeable."

"Well, and this time you will not be mistaken, either, my dear friend," replied Aramis.

"Do not keep me in suspense," added the superintendent, phlegmatically.

"Well, then, I have seen Madame de Chevreuse."

"The old duchess, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Her ghost, perhaps?"

"No, no; the old she-wolf herself."

"Without teeth?"

"Possibly, but not without claws."

"Well! what harm can she meditate against me? I am no miser, with women who are not prudes. Generosity is a quality that is always prized, even by the woman who no longer dares to provoke love."

"Madame de Chevreuse knows very well that you are not avaricious, since she wishes to draw some money out of you."

"Indeed! under what pretext?"

"Oh, pretexts are never wanting with her! Let me tell you what hers is. It seems that the duchess has a good many letters of M. de Mazarin's in her possession."

"I am not surprised at that, for the prelate was gallant enough."

"Yes; but these letters have nothing whatever to do with the prelate's love-affairs. They concern, it is said, financial matters."

"And accordingly they are less interesting."

"Do you not suspect what I mean?"

"Not at all."

"You have never heard that there was a charge of embezzlement?"

"Yes, a hundred, nay, a thousand times. Since I have been engaged in public matters I have hardly heard any-

thing else but that, — just as in your own case when you, a bishop, are charged with impiety, or a musketeer, with cowardice. The very thing of which they are always accusing ministers of finance is the embezzlement of public funds."

"Very good. But let us specify; for according to the duchess, M. de Mazarin specifies."

"Let us see what he specifies."

"Something like a sum of thirteen million livres, the disposal of which it would be very embarrassing for you to disclose."

"Thirteen millions!" said the superintendent, stretching himself in his arm-chair, in order to enable him the more comfortably to look up towards the ceiling, — "thirteen millions! I am trying to remember them out of all those I have been accused of stealing."

"Do not laugh, my dear monsieur; it is serious. It is certain that the duchess has certain letters in her possession; and these letters must be genuine, since she wished to sell them to me for five hundred thousand livres."

"Oh, one can have a very tolerable calumny for such a sum as that!" replied Fouquet. "Ah! now I know what you mean;" and he began to laugh heartily.

"So much the better," said Aramis, a little reassured.

"I remember the story of those thirteen millions now. Yes, yes, I remember them quite well."

"I am delighted to hear it; tell me about them."

"Well, then, one day Signor Mazarin, Heaven rest his soul! made a profit of thirteen millions upon a concession of lands in the Valtelline; he cancelled them in the registry of receipts, sent them to me, and then made me advance them to him for war expenses."

"Very good; then there is no doubt of their proper disbursement?"

"No; the cardinal placed them under my name, and gave me a receipt."

"You have the receipt?"

"Of course," said Fouquet, as he quietly rose from his chair, and went to his large ebony bureau, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold.

"What I most admire in you," said Aramis, with an air of great satisfaction, "is your memory, in the first place; then, your self-possession; and finally, the perfect order which prevails with you, — you, a poet *par excellence.*"

"Yes," said Fouquet, "I am orderly out of a spirit of idleness, to save myself the trouble of looking after things; and so I know that Mazarin's receipt is in the third drawer under the letter M. I open the drawer, and place my hand upon the very paper I need. In the night, without a light, I could find it;" and with a confident hand he felt the bundle of papers which were piled up in the open drawer. "Nay, more than that," he continued, "I remember the paper as if I saw it. It is thick, somewhat crumpled, with gilt edges. Mazarin had made a blot upon the figure of the date. Ah!" he said, "the paper knows we are talking about it, and that we want it very much, and so it hides itself out of the way." As the superintendent looked into the drawer, Aramis rose from his seat. "This is very singular," said Fouquet.

"Your memory is treacherous, my dear monseigneur; look in another drawer."

Fouquet took out the bundle of papers, and turned them over once more; he then became very pale.

"Don't confine your search to that drawer," said Aramis; "look elsewhere."

"Quite useless. I have never made a mistake. No one but myself arranges any papers of mine of this nature; no

one but myself ever opens this drawer, of which, besides, no one but myself is aware of the secret."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Aramis, agitated.

"That Mazarin's receipt has been stolen from me. Madame de Chevreuse was right, Chevalier; I have appropriated the public funds; I have robbed the State coffers of thirteen millions of money; I am a thief, M. d'Herblay."

"Nay, nay; do not get irritated, do not get excited!"

"And why not, Chevalier? Surely there is every reason for it. If the legal proceedings are well arranged, and a judgment is given in accordance with them, your friend the superintendent can follow to Montfaucon his colleague Enguerrand de Marigny and his predecessor Samblançay."

"Oh," said Aramis, smiling, "not so fast!"

"And why not? Why not so fast? What do you suppose Madame de Chevreuse will have done with those letters, — for you refused them, I suppose?"

"Yes; at once. I suppose that she went and sold them to M. Colbert."

"Well?"

"I said I supposed so. I might have said I was sure of it, for I had her followed; and when she left me, she returned to her own house, went out by a back door, and proceeded straight to the intendant's house in the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs."

"Legal proceedings will be instituted, then scandal and dishonor will follow; and all will fall upon me like a thunderbolt, blindly, harshly, pitilessly."

Aramis approached Fouquet, who sat trembling in his chair, close to the open drawers; he placed his hand on his shoulder, and in an affectionate tone of voice said, "Do not forget that the position of M. Fouquet can in no way be compared to that of Samblançay or of Marigny."

"And why not, in Heaven's name?"

"Because the proceedings against those ministers were determined, completed, and the sentence carried out; while in your case the same thing cannot take place."

"Another blow! Why not? A peculator is, under any circumstances, a criminal."

"Those criminals who know how to find a safe asylum are never in danger."

"What! Make my escape, — fly?"

"No; I do not mean that. You forget that all such proceedings originate in the parliament; that they are instituted by the procureur-général, and that you are the procureur-général. You see that unless you wish to condemn yourself — "

"Oh!" cried Fouquet suddenly, dashing his fist upon the table.

"Well, what? What is the matter?"

"I am procureur-général no longer."

Aramis at this reply became as livid as death; he pressed his hands together convulsively, and with a wild, haggard look, which almost annihilated Fouquet, said, laying a stress upon every syllable, "You are procureur-général no longer, do you say?"

"No."

"Since when?"

"Since four or five hours ago."

"Take care!" interrupted Aramis, coldly. "I do not think you are in full possession of your senses, my friend; collect yourself!"

"I tell you," returned Fouquet, "that a little while ago some one came to me, brought by my friends, to offer me fourteen hundred thousand livres for the appointment, and that I have sold it."

Aramis looked as if he had been thunder-stricken; the

intelligent and mocking expression of his countenance was changed to an expression of gloom and terror which had more effect upon the superintendent than all the exclamations and speeches in the world. "You had need of money, then?" he said at last.

"Yes; to discharge a debt of honor;" and in a few words he gave Aramis an account of Madame de la Bellière's generosity, and of the manner in which he had thought he ought to repay that generosity.

"Yes," said Aramis; "that is, indeed, a fine trait. What has it cost?"

"Exactly the fourteen hundred thousand livres, — the price of my appointment."

"Which you received in that manner, without reflection. Oh, imprudent friend!"

"I have not yet received the amount; but I shall to-morrow."

"It is not yet completed, then?"

"It must be carried out, though; for I have given the goldsmith, for twelve o'clock to-morrow, an order upon my treasury, into which the purchaser's money will be paid at six or seven o'clock."

"Heaven be praised!" cried Aramis, clapping his hands together; "nothing is yet completed, since you have not been paid."

"But the goldsmith?"

"You shall receive the fourteen hundred thousand livres from me at a quarter before twelve."

"Stay a moment! It is at six o'clock, this very morning, that I am to sign."

"Oh, I tell you that you will not sign!"

"I have given my word, Chevalier."

"If you have given it, you will take it back again; that is all."

"Ah! what are you saying to me?" cried Fouquet, in a most expressive tone. "Fouquet recall his word, after it has been once pledged!"

Aramis replied to the almost stern look of the minister with a look full of anger. "Monsieur," he said, "I believe I have deserved to be called a man of honor, have I not? As a soldier I have risked my life five hundred times; as a priest I have rendered great services, both to the State and to my friends. The value of a word, once passed, is estimated according to the worth of the man who gives it. So long as it is in his own keeping it is of the purest, finest gold; when his wish to keep it has passed away, it is a two-edged sword. With that word, therefore, he defends himself as with an honorable weapon, considering that when he disregards his word, — that man of honor, — he endangers his life; he courts the risk rather than that his adversary should secure advantages. And then, Monsieur, he appeals to Heaven and to justice."

Fouquet bent down his head, as he replied: "I am a poor Breton, opinionated and commonplace; my mind admires and fears yours. I do not say that I keep my word from a moral instinct; I keep it, if you like, by force of habit. But at all events, the ordinary run of men are simple enough to admire this custom of mine. It is my single virtue; leave me the honor of it."

"And so you are determined to sign the sale of the office which would defend you against all your enemies?"

"Yes, I shall sign."

"You will deliver yourself up, then, bound hand and foot, from a false notion of honor, which the most scrupulous casuists would disdain?"

"I shall sign," repeated Fouquet.

Aramis sighed deeply, and looked all round him with the impatient gesture of a man who would gladly dash

something to pieces, as a relief to his feelings. "We have still one means left," he said; "and I trust you will not refuse to make use of that?"

"Certainly not, if it be loyal and honorable, — as everything is, in fact, which you propose."

"I know nothing more loyal than a renunciation of your purchaser. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Certainly; but — "

"'But'! — if you allow me to manage the affair, I do not despair."

"Oh, you shall be absolute master!"

"With whom are you in treaty? What man is it?"

"I am not aware whether you know the parliament?"

"Most of its members. One of the presidents, perhaps?"

"No; only a counsellor — "

"Ah, ah!"

"Who is named Vanel."

Aramis became purple. "Vanel!" he cried, rising abruptly from his seat, — "Vanel! the husband of Marguerite Vanel?"

"Exactly."

"Of your former mistress?"

"Yes, my dear fellow. She is anxious to be Madame the Procureuse-Général. I certainly owed poor Vanel that slight concession; and I am a gainer by it, since I at the same time confer a pleasure on his wife."

Aramis walked straight to Fouquet, and took hold of his hand. "Do you know," he said very calmly, "the name of Madame Vanel's new lover?"

"Ah! she has a new lover, then? I was not aware of it; no, I have no idea what his name is."

"His name is M. Jean Baptiste Colbert; he is intendant of the finances; he lives in the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, where Madame de Chevreuse has this

evening carried Mazarin's letters, which she wishes to sell."

"Gracious Heaven!" murmured Fouquet, passing his hand across his forehead, from which the perspiration was starting.

"You now begin to understand, do you not?"

"That I am lost, — yes."

"Do you now think it worth while to be so scrupulous with regard to keeping your word?"

"Yes," said Fouquet.

"These obstinate people always contrive matters in such a way that one cannot but admire them," murmured Aramis.

Fouquet held out his hand to him; and at the very moment a richly ornamented tortoise-shell clock, supported by golden figures, which was standing on a console table opposite to the fireplace, struck six. The sound of a door opening in the vestibule was heard.

"M. Vanel," said Gourville, at the door of the cabinet, "inquires if Monseigneur can receive him."

Fouquet turned his eyes from those of Aramis and replied, "Let M. Vanel come in."

CHAPTER LVI.

M. COLBERT'S ROUGH DRAUGHT.

VANEL, who entered at this stage of the conversation, was for Aramis and Fouquet the full stop which terminates a sentence. But, for Vanel, Aramis's presence in Fouquet's cabinet had quite another signification. At his first step into the room he fixed upon the delicate yet firm countenance of the Bishop of Vannes a look of astonishment which soon became one of scrutinizing inquiry. As for Fouquet, a true politician, — that is to say, complete master of himself, — he had already, by the energy of his own resolute will, contrived to remove from his face all traces of the emotion which Aramis's revelation had occasioned. He was no longer, therefore, a man overwhelmed by misfortune and reduced to expedients; he held his head proudly erect, and extended his hand with a gesture of welcome to Vanel. He was prime minister; he was in his own house. Aramis knew the superintendent well; the delicacy of the feelings of his heart and the exalted nature of his mind could no longer surprise him. He confined himself, then, for the moment — intending to resume later an active part in the conversation — to the difficult rôle of a man who looks on and listens in order to learn and understand.

Vanel was visibly overcome, and advanced into the middle of the cabinet, bowing to everything and everybody. "I am come," he said.

"You are exact, M. Vanel," returned Fouquet.

"In matters of business, Monseigneur," replied Vanel, "I look upon exactitude as a virtue."

"No doubt, Monsieur."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Aramis, indicating Vanel with his finger, but addressing himself to Fouquet; "this is the gentleman, I believe, who has come about the purchase of your appointment?"

"Yes, I am," replied Vanel, astonished at the extremely haughty tone with which Aramis had put the question; "but in what way am I to address you, who do me the honor —"

"Call me Monseigneur," replied Aramis, dryly.

Vanel bowed.

"Come, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "a truce to these ceremonies! Let us proceed to business."

"Monseigneur sees," said Vanel, "that I am waiting his pleasure."

"On the contrary, it is I who wait," replied Fouquet.

"What for, may I be permitted to ask, Monseigneur?"

"I thought that perhaps you would have something to say."

"Oh," said Vanel to himself, "he has reflected on the matter, and I am lost!" But resuming his courage he continued, "No, Monseigneur, nothing, — absolutely nothing more than what I said to you yesterday, and which I am ready to repeat now."

"Come, now, tell me frankly, M. Vanel, is not the affair rather a burdensome one for you?"

"Certainly, Monseigneur; fourteen hundred thousand livres is an important sum."

"So important, indeed," said Fouquet, "that I have reflected —"

"You have been reflecting, do you say, Monseigneur?" exclaimed Vanel, anxiously.

"Yes; that you might not yet be in a position to purchase."

"Oh, Monseigneur!"

"Do not make yourself uneasy on that score, M. Vanel! I shall not blame you for a failure in your word, which evidently will be due to inability on your part."

"Oh, yes, Monseigneur, you would blame me, and you would be right in doing so," said Vanel: "for a man must be either imprudent or a fool to undertake engagements which he cannot keep; and I, at least, have always regarded a thing agreed upon as a thing done."

Fouquet colored, while Aramis uttered a "Hum!" of impatience.

"You would be wrong to emphasize such notions as those, Monsieur," said the superintendent: "for a man's mind is variable and full of little caprices, very excusable, and sometimes very worthy of respect; and a man may have wished for something yesterday, and to-day have changed his mind."

Vanel felt a cold sweat trickle down his face. "Monseigneur!" he muttered.

Aramis, who was delighted to find the superintendent carrying on the debate with such clearness and precision, stood leaning his arm upon the marble top of a console table, and began to play with a small gold knife with a malachite handle. Fouquet did not hasten to reply; but after a moment's pause, "Come, my dear M. Vanel," he said, "I will explain to you how I am situated." Vanel began to tremble. "Yesterday I wished to sell —"

"Monseigneur has done more than wish to sell; Monseigneur has sold."

"Well, well, that may be so; but to-day I ask you, as a favor, to restore me my word which I pledged you."

"I received your word as a perfect assurance that it would be kept."

"I know that; and that is the reason why I now entreat you, — do you understand me? — I entreat you to restore it to me."

Fouquet suddenly paused. The words "I entreat you," the force of which he did not immediately perceive, seemed almost to choke him as he uttered it. Aramis, still playing with his knife, fixed a look upon Vanel which seemed to search the inmost recess of his heart.

Vanel simply bowed as he said, "I am overcome, Monseigneur, at the honor you do me to consult me upon a matter of business which is already completed; but — "

"Nay, do not say *but*, dear M. Vanel."

"Alas! Monseigneur, you see," he said, as he opened a large pocket-book, "I have brought the money with me, — the whole sum, I mean. And here, Monseigneur, is the contract of sale which I have just effected of a property belonging to my wife. The order is authentic in every way, the necessary signatures have been attached to it, and it is made payable at sight; it is ready money. In one word, the affair is complete."

"My dear M. Vanel, there is not a matter of business in this world, however important it may be, which cannot be postponed in order to oblige — "

"Certainly," said Vanel, awkwardly.

"To oblige a man who by that means might and would be made a devoted friend."

"Certainly, Monseigneur."

"And the more completely a friend, M. Vanel, in proportion to the importance of the service rendered, since the value of the service he had received would have been so considerable. Well, what do you decide?"

Vanel preserved silence. In the mean time Aramis had

continued his observations. Vanel's narrow face, his deeply sunk orbits, his arched eyebrows, had revealed to the Bishop of Vannes the type of an avaricious and ambitious character. Aramis's method was to oppose one passion by another. He saw Fouquet defeated, demoralized; he threw himself into the contest with new weapons. "Excuse me, Monseigneur," he said; "you forget to show M. Vanel that his own interests are diametrically opposed to this renunciation of the sale."

Vanel looked at the bishop with astonishment; he had hardly expected to find an auxiliary in him. Fouquet also paused to listen to the bishop.

"Do you not see," continued Aramis, "that M. Vanel, in order to purchase your appointment, has been obliged to sell a property which belongs to his wife? Well, that is no slight matter; for one cannot displace fourteen or fifteen hundred thousand livres, as he has done, without considerable loss and very serious inconvenience."

"Perfectly true," said Vanel, whose secret Aramis had with his keen-sighted gaze wrung from the bottom of his heart.

"Such embarrassments," pursued Aramis, "resolve themselves into expenses; and when one has a large disbursement to make, expenses are to be considered."

"Yes, yes," said Fouquet, who began to understand Aramis's meaning.

Vanel remained silent; he, too, had understood him.

Aramis observed his coldness of manner and his silence. "Very good," he said to himself, "you are waiting, I see, until you know the amount; but do not fear! I shall send you such a flight of crowns that you cannot but capitulate on the spot."

"We must offer M. Vanel a hundred thousand crowns at once," said Fouquet, carried away by his generous feelings.

The sum was a good one. A prince, even, would have been satisfied with such a bonus. A hundred thousand crowns at that period was the dowry of a king's daughter.

Vanel, however, did not move.

"He is a rascal!" thought the bishop; "we must offer the five hundred thousand livres at once!" and he made a sign to Fouquet.

"You seem to have spent more than that, dear M. Vanel," said the superintendent. "The price of money is enormous. You must have made a great sacrifice in selling your wife's property. Well, what can I have been thinking of? It is an order for five hundred thousand livres that I am about to sign for you; and even in that case I shall feel that I am greatly indebted to you."

There was not a single gleam of delight or desire on Vanel's face, which remained impassive; not a muscle of it changed in the slightest degree. Aramis cast a look of despair at Fouquet, and then, going straight up to Vanel and taking hold of him by the coat with the gesture used by men of high rank, he said: "M. Vanel, it is neither the inconvenience, nor the displacement of your money, nor the sale of your wife's property even, that you are thinking of at this moment; it is something still more important. I can well understand it; so pay particular attention to what I am going to say."

"Yes, Monseigneur," Vanel replied, beginning to tremble. The fire in the eyes of the prelate scorched him.

"I offer you, therefore, in the superintendent's name, not three hundred thousand livres, nor five hundred thousand, but a million. A million, — do you understand me?" he added, as he shook him nervously.

"A million!" repeated Vanel, as pale as death.

"A million; in other words, at the present rate of interest, an income of seventy thousand livres!"

"Come, Monsieur," said Fouquet, "you can hardly refuse that. Answer! Do you accept?"

"Impossible!" murmured Vanel.

Aramis bit his lips, and something like a white cloud passed over his face. That cloud indicated thunder. He still kept his hold on Vanel. "You have purchased the appointment for fifteen hundred thousand livres, I think? Well, we will give you these fifteen hundred thousand livres; by paying M. Fouquet a visit, and shaking hands with him, you will have become a gainer of a million and a half. You get honor and profit at the same time, M. Vanel."

"I cannot do it," said Vanel, hoarsely.

"Very well," replied Aramis, who had grasped Vanel so tightly by the coat that when he let go his hold Vanel staggered back a few paces, — "very well; one can now see clearly enough your object in coming here."

"Yes," said Fouquet, "one can easily see that."

"But —" said Vanel, attempting to stand erect before the weakness of these two men of honor.

"The fellow presumes to speak!" said Aramis, with the tone of an emperor.

"Fellow?" repeated Vanel.

"The wretch, I meant to say," added the prelate, who had now resumed his usual self-possession. "Come, Monsieur, produce your deed of sale! You should have it there, in one of your pockets, already prepared, as an assassin holds his pistol or his dagger concealed under his cloak."

Vanel began to mutter something.

"Enough!" cried Fouquet. "Where is this deed?"

Vanel tremblingly searched in his pockets; and as he drew out his pocket-book, a paper fell out of it, while Vanel offered the other to Fouquet. Aramis pounced

upon the paper which had fallen out, the handwriting of which he recognized.

"I beg your pardon," said Vanel; "that is a rough draught of the deed."

"I see that very clearly," retorted Aramis, with a smile more cutting than a lash of a whip would have been; "and what surprises me is that this draught is in M. Colbert's handwriting. Look, Monseigneur, look!" And he handed the paper to Fouquet, who recognized the truth of his remark; for, covered with erasures, with inserted words, the margins filled with additions, this deed — an open proof of Colbert's plot — had just revealed everything to its unhappy victim.

"Well!" murmured Fouquet.

Vanel, completely humiliated, seemed as if he were looking for some deep hole where he could hide himself.

"Well!" said Aramis, "if your name were not Fouquet, and if your enemy's name were not Colbert, — if you had to deal only with this mean thief before you, I should say to you, 'Repudiate it!' Such a proof as this absolves you from your word. But these fellows would think you were afraid; they would fear you less than they do; therefore sign, Monseigneur!" and he held out a pen towards him.

Fouquet pressed Aramis's hand; but instead of the deed which Vanel handed to him, he took the rough draught of it.

"No, not that paper," said Aramis, hastily; "this is the one. The other is too precious a document for you to part with."

"No, no!" replied Fouquet. "I will sign upon the paper of M. Colbert; and I write, 'The writing is approved.'" He then signed, and said, "Here it is, M.

Vanel;" and the latter seized the paper, laid down his money, and was about to retreat.

"One moment!" said Aramis. "Are you quite sure the exact amount is there? It ought to be counted over, M. Vanel, particularly since it is money which M. Colbert presents to the ladies. Ah, that worthy M. Colbert is not so generous as M. Fouquet!" and Aramis, spelling every word, every letter of the order to pay, distilled his wrath and his contempt, drop by drop, upon the miserable wretch, who had to submit to this torture for a quarter of an hour. He was then dismissed, not in words, but by a gesture, as one dismisses a beggar or discharges a menial.

As soon as Vanel had gone, the minister and the prelate, their eyes fixed on each other, remained silent for a few moments.

"Well," said Aramis, the first to break the silence, "to what can that man be compared, who, entering into a conflict with an enemy armed from head to foot, thirsting for his life, strips himself, throws down his arms, and sends kisses to his adversary? Good faith, M. Fouquet, is a weapon which scoundrels very frequently make use of against men of honor, and it answers their purpose. Men of honor ought in their turn, also, to make use of bad faith against such scoundrels. You would soon see how strong they would become without ceasing to be men of honor."

"It would be rascally conduct," replied Fouquet.

"Not at all; it would be merely coquetting or playing with the truth. And now, since you have finished with this Vanel, since you have deprived yourself of the happiness of confounding him by repudiating your word, and since you have given up, to be used against yourself, the only weapon which can ruin us —"

"My dear friend," said Fouquet, mournfully, "you are like the teacher of philosophy whom La Fontaine was tell-

ing us about the other day: he saw a child drowning, and began to read him a lecture divided into three heads."

Aramis smiled as he said, "Philosophy, — yes; teacher, — yes; a drowning child, — yes; but a child that can be saved, — you shall see. And, first of all, let us talk about business." Fouquet looked at him with an air of astonishment. "Did you not some time ago speak to me about an idea you had of giving a *fête* at Vaux?"

"Oh," said Fouquet, "that was when affairs were flourishing!"

"A *fête*, I believe, to which the king, without prompting, invited himself?"

"No, no, my dear prelate; a *fête* to which M. Colbert advised the king to invite himself!"

"Ah! exactly; as it would be a *fête* of so costly a character that you would be ruined in giving it?"

"Precisely so. In other times, as I said just now, I had a kind of pride in showing my enemies the fruitfulness of my resources; I felt it a point of honor to strike them with amazement, in creating millions under circumstances where they had imagined nothing but bankruptcies possible. But at the present day I am arranging my accounts with the State, with the king, with myself; and I must now become a mean, stingy man. I shall be able to prove to the world that I can act or operate with my deniers as I used to do with my bags of pistoles; and beginning to-morrow, my equipages shall be sold, my houses mortgaged, my expenses contracted."

"Beginning with to-morrow," interrupted Aramis, quietly, "you will occupy yourself, without the slightest delay, with your *fête* at Vaux, which must hereafter be spoken of with the most magnificent productions of your most prosperous days."

"You are mad, Chevalier d'Herblay."

"I? You do not think that."

"What do you mean, then? Do you not know that a *fête* at Vaux, of the very simplest possible character, would cost four or five millions?"

"I do not speak of a *fête* of the very simplest possible character, my dear superintendent."

"But since the *fête* is to be given to the king," replied Fouquet, who misunderstood Aramis's idea, "it cannot be simple."

"Just so; it ought to be on a scale of the most unbounded magnificence."

"In that case I shall have to spend ten or twelve millions."

"You shall spend twenty if you require it," said Aramis, calmly.

"Where shall I get them?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"That is my affair, Monsieur the Superintendent; and do not be uneasy for a moment about it. The money will be placed at once at your disposal, sooner than you will have arranged the plans of your *fête*."

"Chevalier! Chevalier!" said Fouquet, giddy with amazement, "whither are you hurrying me?"

"Across the gulf into which you were about to fall," replied the Bishop of Vannes. "Take hold of my cloak and throw fear aside!"

"Why did you not tell me that sooner, Aramis? There was a day when with only one million you could have saved me."

"While to-day I can give you twenty," said the prelate. "Such is the case, however. The reason is very simple. On the day you speak of I had not at my disposal the million which you needed, while now I can easily procure the twenty millions we require."

"May Heaven hear you, and save me!"

Aramis smiled, with the singular expression habitual with him. "Heaven never fails to hear me," he said, "perhaps because I pray with a loud voice."

"I abandon myself to you unreservedly," Fouquet murmured.

"No, no; I do not understand it in that manner. It is I who am entirely at your service. Therefore you, who have the clearest, the most delicate, and the most ingenious mind, — you shall have entire control over the *fête*, even to the very smallest details. Only — "

"Only?" said Fouquet, as a man accustomed to appreciate the value of a parenthesis.

"Well, then, leaving the entire invention of the details to you, I shall reserve to myself a general superintendence over the execution."

"In what way?"

"I mean that you will make of me, on that day, a major-domo, a sort of inspector-general, or factotum, — something between a captain of the guard and manager or steward. I will look after the people, and will keep the keys of the doors. You will give your orders, of course; but will give them to no one but to me. They will pass through my lips, to reach those for whom they are intended, — you understand?"

"No, I do not understand."

"But you agree?"

"Of course, of course, my friend."

"That is all I care about, then. Thanks; and now go and prepare your list of invitations."

"Whom shall I invite?"

"Every one."

CHAPTER LVII.

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR THINKS IT IS NOW TIME TO RETURN TO THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

Our readers have observed in this history the adventures of the new and of the past generation unrolled, as it were, side by side. To the former, the reflection of the glory of earlier years, the experience of the bitter things of this world; to the former, also, the peace which takes possession of the heart, and the healing of the scars which were formerly deep and painful wounds. To the latter, the conflicts of love and vanity, bitter disappointments and ineffable delights, — life instead of memory. If any variety has been presented to the reader in the different episodes of this tale, it is to be attributed to the numerous shades of color which are presented on this double palette, where two pictures are seen side by side, mingling and harmonizing their severe and pleasing tones. The repose of the emotions of the one is found in the midst of the emotions of the other. After having talked reason with older heads, one likes to share in the wildness of young people. Therefore, if the threads of this story do not seem very intimately to connect the chapter we are now writing with that we have just written, we do not intend to give ourselves any more thought or trouble about it than Ruysdael took in painting an autumn sky after having finished a spring-time scene. We wish our readers to do as much, and to resume Raoul de Bragelonne's story at the very place where our last sketch left him.

In a state of frenzy and dismay, — or rather without reason, without will, without purpose, — Raoul fled heedlessly away after the scene in La Vallière's room. The king, Montalais, Louise, that chamber, that strange exclusion, Louise's grief, Montalais's terror, the king's wrath, — all seemed to indicate some misfortune. But what? He had arrived from London because he had been told of the existence of a danger, and at once this danger showed itself. Was not that sufficient for a lover? Certainly it was; but it was insufficient for a pure and upright heart such as his. And yet Raoul did not seek for explanations in the quarter where all jealous or less timid lovers would have sought them. He did not go straightway to his mistress, and say, "Louise, is it true that you love me no longer? Is it true that you love another?" Full of courage, full of friendship, as he was full of love; a religious observer of his word, and believing the words of others, — Raoul said within himself, "Guiche wrote to put me on my guard; Guiche knows something; I will go and ask Guiche what he knows, and tell him what I have seen."

The journey was not a long one. Guiche, who had been brought from Fontainebleau to Paris within the last two days, was beginning to recover from his wound, and to walk about a little in his room. He uttered a cry of joy as he saw Raoul enter his apartment with the eagerness of friendship. Raoul uttered a cry of grief on seeing De Guiche so pale, so thin, so melancholy. A few words, and a simple gesture which De Guiche made to put aside Raoul's arm, were sufficient to inform the latter of the truth.

"Ah! so it is," said Raoul, seating himself beside his friend; "one loves and dies."

"No, no, not dies," replied Guiche, smiling, "since I am now recovering, and since, too, I can press you in my arms."

"Ah! I understand."

"And I understand you too. You fancy I am unhappy, Raoul?"

"Alas!"

"No; I am the happiest of men. My body suffers, but not my mind or my heart. If you only knew — Oh, I am, indeed, the very happiest of men!"

"So much the better," replied Raoul; "so much the better, provided it lasts."

"It is over. I have had enough happiness to last me to my dying day, Raoul."

"I have no doubt you have had; but she — "

"Listen! I love her, because — But you are not listening to me."

"I beg your pardon."

"Your mind is preoccupied."

"Well, yes; your health, in the first place — "

"It is not that."

"My dear friend, you would be wrong, I think, to ask me any questions, — *you!*" and he laid so much weight upon the "you" that he completely enlightened his friend upon the nature of the evil and the difficulty of remedying it.

"You say that, Raoul, on account of what I wrote to you."

"Certainly. We will talk over that matter a little when you shall have finished telling me of all your own pleasures and pains."

"My dear friend, I am entirely at your service now."

"Thank you. I have hurried, I have flown here, — I came here from London in half the time the government couriers usually take. Now, tell me, my dear friend, what did you want?"

"Nothing whatever, but to make you come."

"Well, then, I am here."

"All is quite right, then."

"There is still something else, I imagine?"

"No, indeed."

"De Guiche!"

"Upon my honor!"

"You cannot possibly have crushed all my hopes so violently, or have exposed me to being disgraced by the king for my return, which is in disobedience of his orders, — you cannot, in short, have planted jealousy in my heart, merely to say to me, 'It is all right, sleep quietly!'"

"I do not say to you, Raoul, 'Sleep quietly!' But pray understand me; I never will, nor can I indeed, tell you anything else."

"Oh, my friend, for whom do you take me?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you know anything, why conceal it from me? If you do not know anything, why did you warn me?"

"True, true! I was very wrong, and I regret having done so, Raoul. It seems nothing to write to a friend and say, 'Come;' but to have this friend face to face, to feel him tremble and breathlessly wait to hear what one hardly dare tell him —"

"Dare! I have courage enough, if you have not," exclaimed Raoul, in despair.

"See how unjust you are, and how soon you forget you have to do with a poor wounded fellow, — the half of your heart! Calm yourself, Raoul! I said to you, 'Come;' you are here. Ask nothing further of the unhappy De Guiche."

"You summoned me in the hope that I should see with my own eyes, did you not? Nay, do not hesitate, for I have seen all."

"Oh!" exclaimed De Guiche.

"Or at least I thought —"

"There now, you see you are not sure. But if you have any doubt, my poor friend, what remains for me to do?"

"I have seen Louise agitated, Montalais in a state of bewilderment, the king —"

"The king?"

"Yes. You turn your head aside. The danger is there, the evil is there! tell me, is it not so, — it is the king?"

"I say nothing."

"Oh, you say a thousand upon a thousand times more than nothing! Give me facts! for pity's sake, give me proofs! My friend, the only friend I have, speak! My heart is crushed, wounded to death; I am dying from despair."

"If that really be so, my dear Raoul," replied De Guiche, "you relieve me from my difficulty, and I will tell you all, sure that I can tell you nothing but what is consoling, compared to the despair in which I now see you."

"Go on, go on! I am listening."

"Well, then, I can only tell you what you can learn from the first-comer."

"From the first-comer? It is talked about?" cried Raoul.

"Before you say people talk about it, learn what it is that people can talk about. I assure you, solemnly, that people only talk about what may in truth be very innocent; perhaps a walk —"

"Ah! a walk with the king?"

"Yes, certainly, a walk with the king; and I believe the king has very frequently before taken walks with ladies, without on that account —"

"You would not have written to me, shall I say again, if there had been nothing unusual in this promenade?"

"I know that while the storm lasted, it would have been far better if the king had taken shelter somewhere else than to have remained with his head uncovered before La Vallière; but —"

"But?"

"The king is so courteous!"

"Oh, De Guiche, De Guiche, you are killing me!"

"Do not let us talk any more, then."

"Nay; let us continue. This walk was followed by others, I suppose?"

"No — I mean yes; there was the adventure of the oak, I think. But I know nothing about the matter at all." Raoul rose; De Guiche endeavored to imitate him, notwithstanding his weakness. "Well, I will not add another word; I have said either too much or not enough. Let others give you further information if they will, or if they can; my duty was to warn you, and that I have done. Watch over your own affairs now, yourself!"

"Question others? Alas! you are no true friend to speak to me in that manner," said the young man, in utter distress. "The first man I shall question may be either evilly disposed or a fool, — if the former, he will tell me a lie to torment me; if the latter, he will do still worse. Ah! De Guiche, De Guiche, before two hours are over, I shall have been told ten falsehoods, and shall have as many duels on my hands. Save me, then! Is it not best to know one's whole misfortune?"

"But I know nothing, I tell you. I was wounded, in a fever; my senses were gone, and I have only effaced impressions of it all. But there is no reason why we

should search very far, when the very man we want is close at hand. Is not D'Artagnan your friend?"

"Oh, true, true!"

"Go to him, then. He will throw light on the subject and without seeking to injure your eyes."

At this moment a lackey entered the room. "What is it?" said De Guiche.

"Some one is waiting for Monseigneur in the Cabinet des Porcelaines."

"Very well. Will you excuse me, my dear Raoul? I am so proud since I have been able to walk again."

"I would offer you my arm, De Guiche, if I did not guess that the person in question is a lady."

"I believe so," said De Guiche, smiling, as he quitted Raoul.

Raoul remained motionless, absorbed, overwhelmed, like the miner upon whom a vault has just fallen in: he is wounded, his life-blood is welling fast, his thoughts are confused; he endeavors to recover himself, and to save his life and his reason. A few minutes were all Raoul needed to dissipate the bewildering sensations which had been occasioned by these two revelations. He had already recovered the thread of his ideas, when suddenly through the door he fancied he recognized Montalais's voice in the Cabinet des Porcelaines. "She!" he cried. "Yes; it is indeed her voice! Oh! here is a woman who can tell me the truth; but shall I question her here? She conceals herself even from me; she is coming, no doubt, from Madame. I will see her in her own apartment. She will explain her alarm, her flight, the strange manner in which I was driven out; she will tell me all that, — after M. d'Artagnan, who knows everything, shall have given me fresh strength and courage. Madame — a coquette, I fear, and yet a coquette who is herself in love — has her

moments of kindness; a coquette who is as capricious and uncertain as life or death, but who causes De Guiche to say that he is the happiest of men. He at least is lying on roses." And so he hastily quitted the count's apartments; and reproaching himself as he went for having talked of nothing but his own affairs to De Guiche, he arrived at D'Artagnan's quarters.

CHAPTER LVIII.

BRAGELONNE CONTINUES HIS INQUIRIES.

THE captain was sitting buried in his leathern arm-chair, his spur fixed in the floor, his sword between his legs, and was occupied in reading a great number of letters, as he twisted his mustache. D'Artagnan uttered a welcome full of pleasure when he perceived his friend's son. "Raoul, my boy," he said, "by what lucky accident does it happen that the king has recalled you?"

These words did not sound over-agreeably in the young man's ears, who as he seated himself replied, "Upon my word, I cannot tell you; all that I know is that I have come back."

"Hum!" said D'Artagnan, folding up his letters and directing a look full of meaning at him. "What do you say, my boy? — that the king has not recalled you, and that you have returned? I do not at all understand that."

Raoul was already pale enough, and he began to turn his hat round and round in his hand with an air of constraint.

"What the deuce is the matter, that you look as you do, and what makes you so dumb?" said the captain. "Do people catch that fashion in England? I have been in England, and came back again as lively as a chaffinch. Will you not say something?"

"I have too much to say."

"Ah! ah! how is your father?"

"Forgive me, my dear friend; I was going to ask you that."

D'Artagnan increased the sharpness of his penetrating gaze, which no secret was capable of resisting. "You are unhappy about something," he said.

"I am, indeed; and you know very well what, M. d'Artagnan."

"I?"

"Of course. Nay, do not pretend to be astonished."

"I am not pretending to be astonished, my friend."

"Dear captain, I know very well that in all trials of *finesse*, as well as in all trials of strength, I shall be beaten by you. You can see that at the present moment I am an idiot, a fool. I have neither head nor arm; do not despise, but help me. In a few words, I am the most wretched of living beings."

"Oh! oh! why that?" inquired D'Artagnan, unbuckling his belt and softening the ruggedness of his smile.

"Because Mademoiselle de la Vallière is deceiving me."

"She is deceiving you?" said D'Artagnan, not a muscle of whose face had moved. "Those are big words. Who makes use of them?"

"Every one."

"Ah! if every one says so, there must be some truth in it. I begin to believe there is fire when I see the smoke. It is ridiculous, perhaps, but so it is."

"Therefore you do believe?" exclaimed Bragelonne, quickly.

"I never mix myself up in affairs of that kind; you know that very well."

"What! not for a friend, for a son?"

"Exactly. If you were a stranger, I should tell you — I should tell you nothing at all. How is Porthos, do you know?"

"Monsieur," cried Raoul, pressing D'Artagnan's hand, "I entreat you, in the name of the friendship you have vowed to my father!"

"The deuce take it, you are really ill — from curiosity."

"No, it is not from curiosity; it is from love."

"Good! Another grand word! If you were really in love, my dear Raoul, you would be very different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you were so deeply in love that I could believe I was addressing myself to your heart — But it is impossible."

"I tell you I love Louise to distraction."

D'Artagnan could read to the very bottom of the young man's heart.

"Impossible, I tell you," he said. "You are like all young men, — you are not in love, you are out of your senses."

"Well, suppose it were only that?"

"No sensible man ever succeeded in making much of a brain when the head was turned. I have lost my bearings in the same way a hundred times in my life. You would listen to me, but you would not hear me; you would hear, but you would not understand me; you would understand, but you would not obey me."

"Oh, try, try!"

"I say more. Even if I were unfortunate enough to know something, and foolish enough to communicate it to you — You are my friend, you say?"

"Indeed, yes."

"Very good. I should quarrel with you. You would never forgive me for having destroyed your illusion, as people say of love-affairs."

"M. d'Artagnan, you know all; and yet you plunge me in perplexity, in despair, in death."

"There, there!"

"I never complain, as you know; but as Heaven and my father would never forgive me for blowing out my brains, I will go and get the first person I meet to give me the information which you withhold; I will tell him he lies, and —"

"And you will kill him? A fine affair that would be! So much the better. What should I care for it? Kill my boy, kill, if it can give you any pleasure. It is exactly like a man with the toothache, who keeps on saying, 'Oh, what torture I am suffering! I could bite iron.' My answer always is, 'Bite, my friend, bite; the tooth will remain all the same.'"

"I shall not kill any one, Monsieur," said Raoul, gloomily.

"Yes, yes; you fellows of to-day put on those airs. Instead of killing, you will get killed yourself, I suppose you mean? Very fine indeed! How much I should regret you! I should say all day long: 'Ah! what a high-flown simpleton that Bragelonne was, — doubly an ingrate! I have passed my whole life almost in teaching him how to hold his sword properly, and the silly fellow has got himself spitted like a lark.' Go, then, Raoul, go and get yourself disposed of, if you like. I don't know who taught you logic; but, God damn me, — as the English say, — whoever it was, Monsieur, has stolen your father's money."

Raoul buried his face in his hands, murmuring, "No, no; I have not a single friend in the world!"

"Oh, bah!" said D'Artagnan.

"I meet with nothing but raillery or indifference."

"Idle fancies, Monsieur! I do not laugh at you, although I am a Gascon. And as for being indifferent, if I were so I should have sent you to all the devils a quarter

of an hour ago; for you would sadden a man who was wild with joy, and would kill one who was sad. How now, young man! Do you wish me to disgust you with the girl to whom you are attached, and to teach you to execrate women, who are the honor and happiness of human life?"

"Oh, tell me, Monsieur, and I will bless you!"

"Do you think, my dear fellow, that I can have crammed into my brain all that business about the carpenter and the painter and the staircase and the portrait, and a hundred other tales to sleep over?"

"A carpenter! what do you mean?"

"Upon my word, I don't know. Some one told me there was a carpenter who made an opening through a floor."

"In La Vallière's room?"

"Oh, I don't know where!"

"In the king's apartment, perhaps?"

"Of course! If it were in the king's apartment, I should tell you, I suppose."

"In whose room, then?"

"I have told you for the last hour that I know nothing of the whole affair."

"But the painter, then, — the portrait?"

"It seems that the king wished to have the portrait of one of the ladies belonging to the court."

"La Vallière's?"

"Why, you seem to have only that name in your mouth! Who spoke to you of La Vallière?"

"If it be not her portrait, then, why do you suppose it would concern me?"

"I do not suppose it will concern you. But you ask me all sorts of questions, and I answer you; you wish to know the current scandal, and I tell you. Make the best you can of it!"

Raoul struck his forehead with his hand, in utter despair. "It will kill me!" he said.

"So you have said already."

"Yes, you 're right;" and he made a step or two as if he were going to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"To find some one who will tell me the truth."

"Who is that?"

"A woman."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière herself, I suppose you mean?" said D'Artagnan, with a smile. "Ah, a famous idea that! You wish to be consoled by some one, and you will be so at once. She will tell you nothing ill of herself, of course. So be off!"

"You are mistaken, Monsieur," replied Raoul; "the woman I mean will tell me all the evil she possibly can."

"Montalais, I 'll wager."

"Yes, Montalais."

"Ah! her friend, — a woman who in that capacity will exaggerate all that is either bad or good in the matter. Do not talk to Montalais, my good Raoul."

"You have some reason for wishing me not to talk with Montalais?"

"Well, I admit it. And, in point of fact, why should I play with you as a cat does with a poor mouse? You distress me, — you do indeed. And if I wish you not to speak to Montalais just now, it is because you will be betraying your secret, and people will take advantage of it. Wait, if you can!"

"I cannot."

"So much the worse. Why, you see, Raoul, if I had an idea — but I have not got one."

"Promise that you will pity me, my friend, — that is all I need, — and leave me to get out of the affair by myself."

"Oh, yes, indeed, in order that you may get deeper into the mire! A capital idea, truly! Go and sit down at that table and take a pen in your hand."

"What for?"

"To write to ask Montalais to give you an interview."

"Ah!" said Raoul, snatching eagerly at the pen which the captain held out to him.

Suddenly the door opened; and one of the musketeers, approaching D'Artagnan, said, "Captain, Mademoiselle de Montalais is here, and wishes to speak to you."

"To me?" murmured D'Artagnan. "Ask her to come in. I shall soon see," he said to himself, "whether she wishes to speak to me or not."

The cunning captain was quite right in his suspicions; for as soon as Montalais entered, she exclaimed, "Oh, Monsieur! Monsieur! — I beg your pardon, M. d'Artagnan."

"Oh, I forgive you, Mademoiselle," said D'Artagnan; "I know that at my age those who look for me have great need of me."

"I was looking for M. de Bragelonne," replied Montalais.

"How very fortunate that is! He was looking for you too. Raoul, will you accompany Mademoiselle Montalais?"

"Oh, certainly!"

"Go along, then," he said, as he gently pushed Raoul out of the cabinet; and then taking hold of Montalais's hand, he said in a low voice, "Be kind towards him; spare him, and spare her too, if you can."

"Ah!" she said in the same tone of voice, "it is not I who will speak to him."

"Who, then?"

"It is Madame who has sent for him."

"Very good," cried D'Artagnan; "it is Madame, is it? In an hour's time, then, the poor fellow will be cured."

"Or else dead," said Montalais, in a voice full of compassion. "Adieu, M. d'Artagnan!" she said; and she ran to join Raoul, who was waiting for her at a little distance from the door, very much puzzled and uneasy at the dialogue, which promised no good to him.

CHAPTER LIX.

TWO JEALOUSIES.

Lovers are very tender towards everything which concerns the person with whom they are in love. Raoul no sooner found himself alone with Montalais than he kissed her hand with rapture. "There, there," said the young girl, sadly, "you are throwing your kisses away; I will guarantee that they will not bring you back any interest."

"How so? Why? Will you explain to me, my dear Aure?"

"Madame will explain everything to you. I am going to take you to her apartments."

"What!"

"Silence! and throw aside your wild and savage looks. The windows here have eyes; the walls have ears. Have the kindness not to look at me any longer; be good enough to speak to me aloud of the rain, of the fine weather, and of the charms of England."

"At all events —" interrupted Raoul.

"I tell you, I warn you, that somewhere, I know not where, Madame is sure to have eyes and ears open. I am not very desirous, you can easily believe, to be dismissed or thrown into the Bastille. Let us talk, I tell you; or rather, do not let us talk at all."

Raoul clinched his hands, and assumed the look and gait of a man of courage, but of a man of courage on his way to the torture. Montalais, glancing in every direction, walking along with an easy swinging gait, and hold-

ing up her head pertly in the air, preceded him to Madame's apartments, where he was at once introduced. "Well," he thought, "this day will pass away without my learning anything. De Guiche had too much consideration for my feelings. He has no doubt an understanding with Madame; and both of them, by a friendly plot, have agreed to postpone the solution of the problem. Why have I not here a good enemy, — that serpent De Wardes, for instance? That he would bite is very likely; but I should not hesitate any more. To hesitate, to doubt, — better by far to die!"

Raoul was in Madame's presence. Henrietta, more charming than ever, was half lying, half reclining in her arm-chair, her little feet upon an embroidered velvet cushion; she was playing with a little kitten with long silky fur, which was biting her fingers and hanging by the lace of her collar.

Madame was thinking; she was thinking profoundly. It required both Montalais's and Raoul's voice to disturb her from her reverie.

"Your Highness sent for me?" repeated Raoul.

Madame shook her head, as if she were just awakening, and then said: "Good-morning, M. de Bragelonne. Yes, I sent for you. So you have returned from England?"

"Yes, Madame, and I am at your royal Highness's commands."

"Thank you. Leave us, Montalais!" and the latter immediately left the room.

"You have a few minutes to give me, M. de Bragelonne, have you not?"

"All my life is at your royal Highness's disposal," Raoul returned, with respect, guessing that there was something serious under all these outward courtesies of Madame; nor was he displeased, indeed, to observe the

seriousness of her manner, feeling persuaded that there was some sort of affinity between Madame's sentiments and his own. In fact, every one at court of any perception at all well knew the capricious fancy and absurd despotism of the princess's singular character. Madame had been flattered beyond all bounds by the king's attentions; she had made herself talked about; she had inspired the queen with that mortal jealousy which is the gnawing worm at the root of every woman's happiness. Madame, in a word, in her attempts to cure a wounded pride, had found that her heart had become deeply and passionately attached.

We know what Madame had done to recall Raoul, who had been sent out of the way by Louis XIV. Raoul did not know of her letter to Charles II., although D'Artagnan had guessed its contents. Who will undertake to account for that seemingly inexplicable mixture of love and vanity, that passionate tenderness of feeling, that prodigious duplicity of conduct? No one can, indeed; not even the bad angel who kindles the love of coquetry in the heart of woman.

"M. de Bragelonne," said the princess, after a moment's pause, "have you returned satisfied?"

Bragelonne looked at Madame Henrietta, and seeing how pale she was, from what she was keeping back, from what she was burning to disclose, replied: "Satisfied? What is there for me to be satisfied or dissatisfied about, Madame?"

"But what are those things with which a man of your age and of your appearance is usually either satisfied or dissatisfied?"

"How eager she is!" thought Raoul, terrified. "What is it that she is going to breathe into my heart?" and then, frightened at what she might possibly be going to

tell him, and wishing to put off the moment so wished for but so dreadful, when he should learn all, he replied, "I left behind me, Madame, a dear friend in good health, and on my return I find him very ill."

"You refer to M. de Guiche," replied Madame Henrietta, with the most imperturbable self-possession; "I have heard he is a very dear friend of yours."

"He is, indeed, Madame."

"Well, it is quite true he has been wounded; but he is better now. Oh, M. de Guiche is not to be pitied!" she said hurriedly; and then, recovering herself, added, "But has he anything to complain of? Has he complained of anything? Is there any cause of grief or sorrow with which we are not acquainted?"

"I allude only to his wound, Madame."

"So much the better, then; for in other respects M. de Guiche seems to be very happy, — he is always in very high spirits. I am sure that you, M. de Bragelonne, would far prefer to be, like him, wounded only in the body, — for what, indeed, is such a wound, after all?"

Raoul started. "Alas!" he said to himself, "she is returning to it." He made no reply.

"What did you say?" she inquired.

"I did not say anything, Madame."

"You did not say anything. You disapprove of my observation, then. You are perfectly satisfied, I suppose?"

Raoul approached closer to her. "Madame," he said, "your royal Highness wishes to say something to me, and your instinctive kindness and generosity of disposition induce you to be careful and considerate as to your manner of conveying it. Will your royal Highness throw this kind forbearance aside? I am strong, and I am listening."

"Ah!" replied Henrietta, "what do you understand, then?"

"That which your royal Highness wishes me to understand," said Raoul, trembling, notwithstanding his command over himself, as he pronounced these words.

"In point of fact," murmured the princess, "it seems cruel; but since I have begun —"

"Yes, Madame, since your Highness has deigned to begin, will you deign to finish —"

Henrietta rose hurriedly, and walked a few paces up and down her room. "What did M. de Guiche tell you?" she said suddenly.

"Nothing, Madame."

"Nothing! Did he say nothing? Ah, how well I recognize him in that!"

"No doubt he wished to spare me."

"And that is what friends call friendship. But surely M. d'Artagnan, whom you have just left, must have told you."

"No more than De Guiche, Madame."

Henrietta made a gesture full of impatience, as she said, "At least, you know all that the court has known?"

"I know nothing at all, Madame."

"Not the scene in the storm?"

"Not the scene in the storm."

"Not the *tête-à-tête* in the forest?"

"Not the *tête-à-tête* in the forest."

"Nor the flight to Chaillot?"

Raoul, whose head drooped like the flower which has been cut down by the sickle, made an almost superhuman effort to smile as he replied with the greatest gentleness: "I have had the honor to tell your royal Highness that I am absolutely ignorant of everything, — that I am a poor unremembered outcast, who has this moment arrived from England. There have been so many stormy waves between myself and those whom I left behind me here, that

the rumor of none of the circumstances your Highness refers to has been able to reach me."

Henrietta was affected by his extreme pallor, his gentleness, and his great courage. The principal feeling in her heart at that moment was an eager desire to hear the nature of the remembrance which the poor lover retained of her who had made him suffer so much. "M. de Bragelonne," she said, "that which your friends have refused to do, I will do for you, whom I like and esteem. I will be your friend. You hold your head high, as a man of honor should do; and I should regret that you should have to bow it down under ridicule, and in a few days, it may be, under contempt."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raoul, perfectly livid. "Has it already gone so far?"

"If you do not know," said the princess, "I see that you guess; you were affianced, I believe, to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes, Madame."

"By that right, then, you deserve to be warned about her, as some day or other I shall be obliged to dismiss her from my service —"

"Dismiss La Vallière!" cried Bragelonne.

"Of course! Do you suppose that I shall always be accessible to the tears and protestations of the king? No, no; my house shall no longer be made a convenience for such practices. But you tremble!"

"No, Madame, no," said Bragelonne, making an effort over himself. "I thought I should have died just now; that was all. Your royal Highness did me the honor to say that the king wept and implored you —"

"Yes; but in vain," returned the princess, who then related to Raoul the scene that took place at Chaillot, and the king's despair on his return. She told him of his in-

dulgence to herself, and the terrible word with which the outraged princess, the humiliated coquette, had dashed aside the royal anger.

Raoul bowed his head.

"What do you think of it all?" she said.

"The king loves her," he replied.

"But you seem to think she does not love him!"

"Alas, Madame, I still think of the time when she loved me."

Henrietta was for a moment struck with admiration at this sublime disbelief; and then, shrugging her shoulders, she said: "You do not believe me, I see. Oh, how deeply you love her! And you doubt if she loves the king?"

"Until I have proof. Pardon! I have her word, you see; and she is a noble child."

"You require a proof? Be it so! Come with me."

CHAPTER LX.

A DOMICILIARY VISIT.

THE princess, preceding Raoul, led him through the court-yard towards that part of the building which La Vallière inhabited; and ascending the same staircase which Raoul had himself ascended that very morning, she paused at the door of the room in which the young man had been so strangely received by Montalais. The opportunity had been well chosen to carry out the project which Madame Henrietta had conceived, for the château was empty. The king, the courtiers, and the ladies of the court had set off for St. Germain; Madame Henrietta alone, aware of Bragelonne's return, and thinking over the advantages which might be drawn from this return, had feigned indisposition in order to remain behind. Madame was therefore confident of finding La Vallière's room and Saint-Aignan's apartment unoccupied. She took a pass-key from her pocket, and opened the door of her maid-of-honor's room. Bragelonne's gaze was immediately fixed upon the interior of the room, which he recognized at once; and the impression which the sight of it produced upon him was one of the first tortures that had awaited him. The princess looked at him, and her practised eye could at once detect what was passing in the young man's heart.

"You asked me for proofs," she said; "do not be astonished, then, if I give you them. But if you do not think you have courage enough to confront them, there is still time to withdraw."

"I thank you, Madame," said Bragelonne; "but I came here to be convinced. You promised to convince me; do so."

"Enter, then," said Madame, "and shut the door behind you."

Bragelonne obeyed, and then turned towards the princess, whom he interrogated by a look.

"You know where you are, I suppose?" inquired Madame Henrietta.

"Everything leads me to believe that I am in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"You are."

"But I would observe to your Highness that this room is a room, and is not a proof."

"Wait," said the princess, as she walked to the foot of the bed, folded up the screen into its several compartments, and stooped down towards the floor. "Look here," she continued; "stoop down, and lift up this trap-door."

"A trap-door!" said Raoul, astonished; for D'Artagnan's words recurred to his mind, and he remembered that D'Artagnan had made vague use of that word. He looked in vain for some cleft or crevice which might indicate an opening, or a ring to assist in lifting up some portion of the planking.

"Ah! that is true," said Madame Henrietta, smiling; "I forgot the secret spring, —the fourth plank of the flooring. Press on the spot where you will observe a knot in the wood. Those are the instructions. Press, Viscount! press, I say, yourself!"

Raoul, pale as death, pressed his finger on the spot which had been indicated to him; at the same moment the spring began to work, and the trap rose of its own accord.

"It is very ingenious, certainly," said the princess; "and one can see that the architect foresaw that it would be a small hand which would have to employ that device. See how easily the trap-door opens without assistance!"

"A staircase!" cried Raoul.

"Yes; and a very pretty one too," said Madame Henrietta. "See, Viscount, the staircase has a balustrade, intended to prevent the falling of timid persons, who might be tempted to descend; and I will risk myself on it accordingly. Come, Viscount, follow me!"

"But before following you, Madame, may I ask whither this staircase leads?"

"Ah! true; I forgot to tell you. You know, perhaps, that formerly M. de Saint-Aignan lived in the very next apartment to the king's?"

"Yes, Madame, I am aware of that, — that was the arrangement, at least, before I left; and more than once I have had the honor of visiting him in his old rooms."

"Well, he obtained the king's leave to change that convenient and beautiful apartment for the two rooms to which this staircase will conduct us, and which together form a lodging for him twice as small and at ten times greater distance from the king, — a close proximity to whom is by no means disdained, in general, by the gentlemen belonging to the court."

"Very good, Madame," returned Raoul; "but go on, I beg, for I do not yet understand."

"Well, then, it accidentally happened," continued the princess, "that M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment is situated underneath the apartments of my maids of honor, and particularly underneath the room of La Vallière."

"But what was the motive of this trap-door and this staircase?"

"That I cannot tell you. Would you like to go down

to M. de Saint-Aignan's rooms? Perhaps we shall there find the solution of the enigma."

Madame set the example by going down herself; and Raoul, sighing deeply, followed her. At every step Bragelonne took, he advanced farther into that mysterious apartment which had been witness to La Vallière's sighs, and still retained the sweetest perfume of her presence. Bragelonne fancied that he perceived, as he inhaled his every breath, that the young girl must have passed through there. Then succeeded to these emanations of herself, which he regarded as invisible though certain proofs, the flowers she preferred to all others, the books of her own selection. Had Raoul preserved a single doubt on the subject, it would have vanished at the secret harmony of tastes and disposition of the mind shown in the things of common use. La Vallière, in Bragelonne's eyes, was present there in every article of furniture, in the color of the hangings, in everything that surrounded him. Dumb, and completely overwhelmed, there was nothing further for him now to learn, and he followed his pitiless conductress as blindly as the culprit follows the executioner. Madame, as cruel as all women of delicate and nervous temperaments are, did not spare him the slightest detail. But it must be admitted that notwithstanding the kind of apathy into which he had fallen, none of these details, even had he been left alone, would have escaped him. The happiness of the woman who loves, when that happiness is derived from a rival, is a torture for a jealous man; but for a jealous man such as Raoul was, for that heart which for the first time was steeped in gall and bitterness, Louise's happiness was in reality an ignominious death, a death of body and soul. He divined all, —their hands clasped in each other's, their faces drawn close together, and reflected, side by side, in loving prox-

imity, as they gazed upon the mirrors around them, — so sweet an occupation for lovers, who, as they thus see themselves twice over, impress the picture more enduringly in their memories. He divined the kiss unseen behind the heavy curtains falling free of their bands. He translated into feverish pains the eloquence of the couches hid in their shadow. That luxury, that studied elegance, full of intoxication; that extreme care to spare the loved object every annoyance or to occasion her a delightful surprise; that strength and power of love multiplied by the strength and power of royalty itself, — struck Raoul a mortal blow. Oh, if there be anything which can assuage the tortures of jealousy, it is the inferiority of the man who is preferred to yourself; while, on the very contrary, if there be a hell within hell, a torture without name in language, it is the almightiness of a god placed at the disposal of a rival, together with youth, beauty, and grace. In moments such as these, God himself seems to have taken part against the rejected lover.

One final pang was reserved for poor Raoul. Madame Henrietta lifted a silk curtain, and behind the curtain he perceived La Vallière's portrait. Not only the portrait of La Vallière, but of La Vallière eloquent of youth, beauty, and happiness, inhaling life and enjoyment at every pore, because at eighteen years of age love itself is life.

"Louise!" murmured Bragelonne, "Louise! is it true, then? Oh, you have never loved me, for never have you looked at me in that manner!" and he felt as if his heart were crushed within his bosom.

Madame Henrietta looked at him, almost envious of his extreme grief, although she well knew there was nothing to envy in it, and that she herself was as passionately loved by De Guiche as Louise by Bragelonne. Raoul interpreted Madame Henrietta's look.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Madame! In your presence I know I ought to have greater mastery over myself. But may the Lord God of heaven and of earth grant that you may never be struck by the blow which crushes me at this moment; for you are but a woman, and would not be able to endure so terrible an affliction. Forgive me! I am but a poor gentleman, while you belong to the race of the happy, of the all-powerful, of the elect — "

"M. de Bragelonne," replied Henrietta, "a heart such as yours merits all the consideration and respect which a queen's heart even can bestow. I am your friend, Monsieur; and as such, indeed, I would not allow your whole life to be poisoned by perfidy and covered with ridicule. It was I, indeed, who with more courage than any of your pretended friends, — I except M. de Guiche, — was the cause of your return from London; it is I, also, who have given you these melancholy proofs, — necessary however for your cure, if you are a lover with courage in his heart, and not a weeping Amadis. Do not thank me; pity me even, and do not serve the king less faithfully than you have done."

Raoul smiled bitterly. "Ah! true, true; I was forgetting that! The king is my master."

"Your liberty, nay, your very life, is at stake."

A steady, penetrating look informed Madame Henrietta that she was mistaken, and that her last argument was not likely to affect the young man. "Take care, M. de Bragelonne," she said; "for if you do not weigh well all your actions, you might throw into an extravagance of wrath a prince whose passions, once aroused, exceed the limits of reason, and you would thereby involve your friends and family in distress. You must bend; you must submit, and must cure yourself."

"I thank you, Madame. I appreciate the advice your

royal Highness is good enough to give me, and I will endeavor to follow it; but one final word, I beg."

"Name it."

"Should I be indiscreet in asking you the secret of this staircase, of this trap-door, — a secret which you have discovered?"

"Oh, nothing is more simple! For the purpose of exercising a surveillance over the young girls who are attached to my service, I have duplicate keys of their doors. It seemed very strange to me that M. de Saint-Aignan should change his apartments; it seemed very strange that the king should come to see M. de Saint-Aignan every day; and finally, it seemed very strange that so many things should be done during your absence, — that the very habits and customs of the court seemed to be changed. I do not wish to be trifled with by the king, nor to serve as a cloak for his love-affairs; for after La Vallière, who weeps, he will take a fancy to Montalais, who laughs, and then to Tonnay-Charente, who sings. To act such a part as that would be unworthy of me. I have thrust aside the scruples which my friendship for you suggested. I have discovered the secret. I have wounded your feelings, I know, and I again entreat you to excuse me; but I had a duty to fulfil. I have discharged it. You are now forewarned. The tempest will soon burst; protect yourself."

"You naturally expect, however, that a result of some kind must follow," replied Bragelonne, with firmness; "for you do not suppose I shall silently accept the shame which is thrust upon me, or the treachery which has been practised against me?"

"You will take whatever steps in the matter you please, M. Raoul; only, do not betray the source whence you derived the truth. That is all I have to ask; that is

the only price I require for the service I have rendered you."

"Fear nothing, Madame!" said Bragelonne, with a bitter smile.

"I bribed the locksmith in whom the lovers had confided. You can just as well do so as myself, can you not?"

"Yes, Madame. Your royal Highness, however, has no other advice or caution to give me, except that of not betraying you?"

"None other."

"I am, therefore, about to beg your royal Highness to allow me to remain here for one moment."

"Without me?"

"Oh, no, Madame! It matters very little, for what I have to do can be done in your presence. I only ask one moment to write a line to some one."

"It is dangerous, M. de Bragelonne. Take care!"

"No one can possibly know that your royal Highness has done me the honor to conduct me here. Besides, I shall sign the letter I am going to write."

"Do as you please, then."

Raoul drew out his tablet, and wrote rapidly on one of the leaves the following words: —

MONSIEUR THE COUNT, — Do not be surprised to find here this paper signed by me. The friend whom I shall very shortly send to call on you will have the honor to explain the object of my visit to you.

VICOMTE RAOUL DE BRAGELONNE.

Rolling up the paper, and slipping it into the lock of the door which communicated with the room set apart for the two lovers, Raoul satisfied himself that the paper was so apparent that De Saint-Aignan could not but see it as he

entered; then he rejoined the princess, who had already reached the top of the staircase. They then separated, — Raoul pretending to thank her Highness; Henrietta pitying, or seeming to pity, with all her heart the unhappy man she had just condemned to so fearful torture. "Oh," she said, as she saw him disappear, pale as death, his eyes injected with blood, "if I had known this, I should have concealed the truth from that poor young man!"

CHAPTER LXI.

PORTHOS'S PLAN OF ACTION.

The multiplicity of the personages we have introduced into this long history compels that each shall appear only in his own turn and according to the exigences of the recital. The result is that our readers have had no opportunity of again meeting our friend Porthos since his return from Fontainebleau. The honors which he had received from the king had not changed the tranquil, affectionate character of that worthy man; only, he held up his head a little higher than usual, and a majesty of demeanor as it were betrayed itself, since the honor of dining at the king's table had been accorded him.

His Majesty's banqueting-room had produced a certain effect upon Porthos. Le Seigneur de Bracieux et de Pierrefonds delighted to remember that during that memorable dinner the numerous array of servants and the large number of officials who were in attendance upon the guests gave a certain tone and effect to the repast, and seemed to furnish the room. Porthos proposed to confer upon Mousqueton a position of some kind or other, in order to establish a sort of hierarchy among his domestics, and to create a military household, — which was not unusual among the great captains of the age, since in the preceding century this luxury had been greatly encouraged by Messieurs de Tréville, de Schomberg, de la Vieuville, without alluding to Messieurs de Richelieu, de Condé, and de Bouillon-Turenne. And, therefore, why should not he, — Porthos, the

friend of the king and of M. Fouquet, a baron, an engineer, etc., — why should not he indeed enjoy all the delightful privileges attached to large possessions and great merit? Somewhat neglected by Aramis, who we know was greatly occupied with M. Fouquet; neglected also, on account of his being on duty, by D'Artagnan; tired of Trüchen and Planchet, — Porthos was surprised to find himself dreaming, without precisely knowing why; but if any one had said to him, "Do you want anything, Porthos?" he would most certainly have replied, "Yes."

After one of those dinners, during which Porthos attempted to recall to his mind all the details of the royal banquet, — half joyful, thanks to the excellence of the wines; half melancholy, thanks to his ambitious ideas, — Porthos was gradually falling off into a gentle doze, when his servant entered to announce that M. de Bragelonne wished to speak to him. Porthos passed into an adjoining room, where he found his young friend in the disposition of mind of which we are already aware. Raoul advanced towards Porthos, and shook him by the hand. Porthos, surprised at his seriousness of aspect, offered him a seat.

"Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "I have a service to ask of you."

"Nothing could happen more fortunately, my young friend," replied Porthos. "I have had eight thousand livres sent me this morning from Pierrefonds; and if you want any money — "

"No, I thank you; it is not money."

"So much the worse, then. I have always heard it said that that is the rarest service, but the easiest to render. The remark struck me; I like to cite remarks that strike me."

"Your heart is as good as your mind is sound and true."

"You are too kind, I'm sure. Will you have your dinner immediately?"

"No; I am not hungry."

"Eh! What a dreadful country England is!"

"Not too much so; but —"

"Well, if such excellent fish and meat were not to be procured there, it would hardly be endurable."

"Yes. I have come —"

"I am listening. Only allow me to take something to drink. One gets thirsty in Paris;" and Porthos ordered a bottle of champagne to be brought. Then, having first filled Raoul's glass, he filled his own, took a large draught, and resumed: "I needed that, in order to listen to you with proper attention. I am now quite at your service. What have you to ask me, dear Raoul? What do you want?"

"Give me your opinion upon quarrels in general, my dear friend."

"My opinion? Well — but — Explain your idea a little," replied Porthos, rubbing his forehead.

"I mean, — are you generally of accommodating disposition whenever any misunderstanding arises between a friend of yours and a stranger, for instance?"

"Oh! of excellent disposition, as always."

"Very good; but what do you do in such a case?"

"Whenever any friend of mine has a quarrel, I always act upon one principle."

"What is that?"

"That all lost time is irreparable, and that one never arranges an affair so well as when the dispute is still warm."

"Ah! indeed, that is your principle?"

"Thoroughly; so, as soon as a quarrel takes place, I bring the two parties together."

"Exactly."

"You understand that by this means it is impossible for an affair not to be arranged."

"I should have thought," said Raoul, with astonishment, "that, treated in this manner, an affair would, on the contrary —"

"Oh, not the least in the world! Just fancy now! I have had in my life something like a hundred and eighty to a hundred and ninety regular duels, without reckoning hasty encounters or chance meetings."

"It is a very handsome number," said Raoul, unable to resist a smile.

"A mere nothing; but I am so gentle. D'Artagnan reckons his duels by hundreds. It is very true he is a little too hard and sharp, — I have often told him so."

"And so," resumed Raoul, "you generally arrange the affairs of honor your friends confide to you."

"There is not a single instance in which I have not finished by arranging every one of them," said Porthos, with a gentleness and confidence which surprised Raoul.

"But the way in which you settle them is at least honorable, I suppose?"

"Oh, rely upon that! And at this stage I will explain my other principle to you. As soon as my friend has confided his quarrel to me, this is what I do: I go to his adversary at once, armed with a politeness and self-possession which are absolutely requisite under such circumstances"

"That is the way, then," said Raoul, bitterly, "that you arrange the affairs so safely."

"I believe you. I go to the adversary, then, and say to him, 'It is impossible, Monsieur, that you are ignorant of the extent to which you have insulted my friend.'"

Raoul frowned at this remark.

"It sometimes happens, — very often indeed," pursued Porthos, — "that my friend has not been insulted at all; he has even been the first to give offence. You can imagine, therefore, whether my language is not well chosen;" and Porthos burst into a peal of laughter.

"Decidedly," said Raoul to himself, while the formidable thunder of Porthos's laughter was ringing in his ears, "I am very unfortunate. De Guiche treats me with coldness, D'Artagnan with ridicule, Porthos is too tame; no one is ready to 'arrange' this affair in my way. And I came to Porthos because I wished to find a sword instead of cold reasoning. Ah, what wretched luck!"

Porthos, who had recovered himself, continued: "By a simple expression, I leave my adversary without an excuse."

"That is as it may happen," said Raoul, indifferently.

"Not at all; it is quite certain. I have not left him an excuse; and then it is that I display all my courtesy, in order to attain the happy issue of my project. I advance, therefore, with an air of great politeness, and taking my adversary by the hand —"

"Oh!" said Raoul, impatiently.

"'Monsieur,' I say to him, 'now that you are convinced of having given the offence, we are sure of reparation; between my friend and yourself the future can offer only an exchange of gracious ceremonies. Consequently I am instructed to give you the length of my friend's sword —"

"What!" said Raoul.

"Wait a minute! — 'the length of my friend's sword. My horse is waiting below; my friend is in such and such a spot, and is impatiently awaiting your agreeable society. I will take you with me; we can call upon your second as we go along. The affair is arranged.'"

"And so," said Raoul, pale with vexation, "you reconcile the two adversaries on the ground."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Porthos. "Reconcile? What for?"

"You said that the affair was arranged."

"Of course! since my friend is waiting for him."

"Well, what then? If he is waiting —"

"Well, if he is waiting, it is merely to stretch his legs a little; the adversary, on the contrary, is stiff from riding. They place themselves in proper order, and my friend kills his opponent; the affair is ended."

"Ah! he kills him?" cried Raoul.

"I should think so," said Porthos. "Is it likely I should ever have as a friend a man who allows himself to get killed? I have a hundred and one friends; at the head of the list stand your father, Aramis, and D'Artagnan, — all of whom are living and well, I believe."

"Oh, my dear baron!" exclaimed Raoul, delightedly, as he embraced Porthos.

"You approve of my method, then?" said the giant.

"I approve of it so thoroughly that I shall have recourse to it this very day, without a moment's delay, — at once, in fact. You are the very man I have been looking for"

"Good! Here I am, then. You want to fight?"

"Absolutely so."

"It is very natural. With whom?"

"With M. de Saint-Aignan."

"I know him, — a most agreeable man, who was exceedingly polite to me the day I had the honor of dining with the king. I shall certainly return his politeness, even if that were not my usual custom. So, he has given you offence?"

"A mortal offence."

"The devil! I can say 'mortal offence'?"

"More than that, even, if you like."

"That is very convenient."

"I may look upon it as all arranged, may I not?" said Raoul, smiling.

"As a matter of course. Where will you be waiting for him?"

"Ah! I forgot. It is a very delicate matter. M. de Saint-Aignan is a great friend of the king."

"So I have heard it said."

"So that if I kill him —"

"Oh, you will kill him certainly; you must take every precaution to do so! But there is no difficulty in these matters now; if you had lived in our early days, — oh, that was something like!"

"My dear friend, you have not quite understood me. I mean that M. de Saint-Aignan being a friend of the king, the affair will be more difficult to manage, since the king might learn beforehand —"

"Oh, no; that is not likely. You know my method: 'Monsieur, you have injured my friend, and —'"

"Yes, I know it."

"And then: 'Monsieur, I have horses below.' I carry him off before he can have spoken to any one."

"Will he allow himself, think you, to be carried off like that?"

"I should think so! I should like to see it fail! It would be the first time, if it did. It is true, though, that the young men of the present day — Bah! I would carry him off bodily, if it were necessary;" and Porthos, adding gesture to speech, lifted Raoul and his chair.

"Very good," said Raoul, laughing. "All we have to do is to state the grounds of the quarrel to M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Well; but that is done, it seems."

"No, my dear M. du Vallon, the usage of the present day requires that the cause of the quarrel should be explained."

"By your new method, yes. Well, then, tell me what it is —"

"The fact is —"

"Deuce take it! See how troublesome this is! In former days we never had any occasion to talk. People fought then for the sake of fighting; and I, for one, know no better reason than that."

"You are quite right, my friend."

"However, tell me what the cause is."

"It is too long a story to tell; only, as one must particularize to some extent —"

"Yes, yes, the devil! — with the new method."

"As it is necessary, I said, to be specific, and as on the other hand the affair is full of difficulties and requires the most absolute secrecy —"

"Oh! oh!"

"You will have the kindness merely to tell M. de Saint-Aignan that he has insulted me, — in the first place, by changing his lodgings."

"By changing his lodgings? Good!" said Porthos, who began to count on his fingers; "next?"

"Then, in getting a trap-door made in his new apartments."

"I understand," said Porthos; "a trap-door! Upon my word, this is very serious; you ought to be furious at that. What the deuce does the fellow mean by getting trap-doors made without first consulting you? Trap-doors! *Mordioux!* I haven't any, except in my dungeons at Bracieux."

"And you will add," said Raoul, "that my last motive

for considering myself insulted is the portrait that M. de Saint-Aignan well knows."

"Is it possible? A portrait too! A change of residence, a trap-door, and a portrait! Why, my dear friend, with but one of those causes of complaint there is enough, and more than enough, for all the gentlemen in France and Spain to cut one another's throats; and that is saying but very little."

"Well, my dear friend, you are furnished with all you need, I suppose?"

"I shall take a second horse with me. Select your own rendezvous; and while you are waiting there you can practise some of the best passes, so as to get your limbs as elastic as possible."

"Thank you. I shall be waiting for you in the wood of Vincennes, close to Minimes."

"All's right, then. Where am I to find this M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"At the Palais-Royal."

Porthos rang a huge hand-bell. "My court suit," he said to the servant who answered the summons, "my horse, and a led horse to accompany me." Then turning to Raoul as soon as the servant had quitted the room, he said, "Does your father know anything about this?"

"No; I am going to write to him."

"And D'Artagnan?"

"No, nor D'Artagnan, either. He is very cautious, you know, and might have diverted me from my purpose."

"D'Artagnan is a sound adviser, though," said Porthos, astonished that in his own loyal faith in D'Artagnan any one could have thought of himself so long as there was a D'Artagnan in the world.

"Dear M. du Vallon," replied Raoul, "do not question me any more, I implore you. I have told you all that I

had to say; it is prompt action that I now expect, as sharp and decided as you know how to arrange it. That, indeed, is my reason for having chosen you."

"You will be satisfied with me," replied Porthos.

"Do not forget, either, that except ourselves no one must know anything of this meeting."

"People always find these things out," said Porthos, "when a dead body is discovered in a wood. But I promise you everything, my dear friend, except concealing the dead body. There it is; and it must be seen, as a matter of course. It is a principle of mine not to bury bodies. That has a smack of the assassin about it. Every risk must take its risk, as they say in Normandy."

"To work, then, my dear friend!"

"Rely upon me," said the giant, finishing the bottle, while the servant spread out upon a sofa the gorgeously decorated dress trimmed with lace. Raoul left the room, saying to himself with a secret delight: "Perfidious king! traitorous monarch! I cannot reach thee. I do not wish it; for the person of a king is sacred. But your accomplice, your panderer, — the coward who represents you, — shall pay for your crime. I will kill him in thy name, and afterwards we will think of Louise."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE CHANGE OF RESIDENCE, THE TRAP-DOOR, AND THE PORTRAIT.

PORTHOS, to his great delight intrusted with this mission, which made him feel young again, took half an hour less than his usual time to put on his court suit. To show that he was a man acquainted with the usages of the highest society, he had begun by sending his lackey to inquire if M. de Saint-Aignan were at home, and received, in answer, that M. le Comte de Saint-Aignan had had the honor of accompanying the king to St. Germain, as well as the whole court, but that Monsieur the Count had just at that moment returned. Immediately upon this reply, Porthos made haste, and reached De Saint-Aignan's apartments just as the latter was having his boots taken off.

The expedition had been delightful. The king, who was in love more than ever and of course happier than ever, had behaved in the most charming manner to every one. Nothing could possibly equal his kindness. M. de Saint-Aignan, it may be remembered, was a poet, and fancied that he had proved that he was so under too many memorable circumstances to allow the title to be disputed by any one. An indefatigable rhymester, he had during the whole of the journey overwhelmed with quatrains, sextains, and madrigals, first the king, and then La Vallière. The king was, on his side, in a similarly poetical mood, and had made a distich; while La Vallière, like all women who are in love, had composed two sonnets. As one may see, then, the day had not been a bad one for

Apollo; and therefore, as soon as he had returned to Paris, De Saint-Aignan, who knew beforehand that his verses would be extensively circulated in court circles, occupied himself, with a little more attention than he had been able to bestow during the excursion, with the composition as well as with the idea itself. Consequently, with all the tenderness of a father about to start his children in life, he candidly asked himself whether the public would find these fruits of his imagination sufficiently elegant and graceful; and in order to make his mind easy on the subject, M. de Saint-Aignan recited to himself the madrigal he had composed, and which he had repeated from memory to the king, and which he had promised to write out for him on his return, —

"'Iris, vos yeux malins ne disent pas toujours
Ce que votre pensée à votre cœur confie;
Iris, pourquoi faut-il que je passe ma vie
À plus aimer vos yeux qui m'ont joué ces tours?'"

This madrigal, graceful as it was, failed to satisfy De Saint-Aignan when it had passed from oral delivery to the written form of poetry. Many had thought it charming, — its author first of all; but on second view it was not so pleasing. So De Saint-Aignan, sitting at his table, with one leg crossed over the other, and rubbing his brow, repeated, —

"'Iris, vos yeux malins ne disent pas toujours —

Oh! as to that, now," he murmured, "that is irreproachable. I might even add that it is somewhat in the manner of Ronsard or Malherbe, which makes me proud. Unhappily, it is not so with the second line. There is good reason for the saying that the easiest line to make is the first." And he continued: —

"'Ce que votre pensée à votre cœur confie —

Ah, there is the 'thought' confiding in the 'heart'! Why should not the heart confide with as good reason in the thought? In faith, for my part, I see nothing to hinder. Where the devil have I been, to bring together these two hemistiches? Now, the third is good, —

'Iris, pourquoi faut-il que je passe ma vie —'

although the rhyme is not strong, — *vie* and *confie*. My faith! the Abbé Boyer, who is a great poet, has, like me, made a rhyme of *vie* and *confie* in the tragedy of 'Oropaste, or the False Tonaxare;' without reckoning that M. Corneille did not scruple to do so in his tragedy of 'Sophonisbe.' Good, then, for *vie* and *confie!* Yes; but the line is impertinent. I remember now that the king bit his nail at that moment. In fact, it gives him the appearance of saying to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, 'How does it happen that I am captivated by you?' It would have been better, I think, to say, —

'Que bénis soient les dieux qui condamnent ma vie —'

Condamnent! ah! well, yes, there is a compliment! — the king condemned to La Vallière — no!" Then he repeated; —

"'Mais bénis soient les dieux qui — destinent ma vie.'

Not bad, although *destinent ma vie* is weak; but, good heavens! everything can't be strong in a quatrain. *A plus aimer vos yeux,* — in loving more whom, what? Obscurity. But obscurity is nothing; since La Vallière and the king have understood me, every one will understand me. Yes; but here is something melancholy, — the last hemistich: *qui m'ont joué ces tours.* The plural necessitated by the rhyme! And then to call the modesty of La Vallière a trick, — that is not happy! I shall be a byword to all my quill-driving acquaintances. They will say that my poems

are verses in the grand-seigneur style; and if the king hears it said that I am a bad poet, he will take it into his head to believe it."

While confiding these words to his heart and engaging his heart in these thoughts, the count was undressing himself. He had just taken off his coat, and was putting on his dressing-gown, when he was informed that M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds was waiting to be received.

"Eh!" he said, "what does that bunch of names mean? I don't know him."

"It is the same gentleman," replied the lackey, "who had the honor of dining with you, Monseigneur, at the king's table, when his Majesty was staying at Fontainebleau."

"With the king, at Fontainebleau?" cried De Saint-Aignan. "Eh! quick, quick! introduce that gentleman."

The lackey hastened to obey. Porthos entered. M. de Saint-Aignan had an excellent recollection of persons, and at the first glance he recognized the gentleman from the country who enjoyed so singular a reputation, and whom the king had received so favorably at Fontainebleau, in spite of the smiles of some of those who were present. He therefore advanced towards Porthos with all outward signs of good-will, which Porthos thought but natural, considering that he himself, whenever he called upon an adversary, hoisted the standard of the most refined politeness. De Saint-Aignan desired the servant to give Porthos a chair; and the latter, who saw nothing unusual in this act of politeness, sat down gravely, and coughed.

The ordinary courtesies having been exchanged between the two gentlemen, the count, since to him the visit was paid, said, "May I ask, Monsieur the Baron, to what happy circumstance I owe the favor of your visit?"

"The very thing I am about to have the honor of explaining to you, Monsieur the Count; but, I beg your pardon —"

"What is the matter, Monsieur?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"I regret to say that I have broken your chair."

"Not at all, Monsieur," said De Saint-Aignan; "not at all."

"It is the fact, though, Monsieur the Count; I have broken it, — so much so, indeed, that if I remain in it I shall fall down, which would be an exceedingly disagreeable position for me in the discharge of the very serious mission which has been intrusted to me with regard to yourself."

Porthos rose; and but just in time, for the chair had given way several inches. De Saint-Aignan looked about him for something more solid for his guest to sit upon.

"Modern articles of furniture," said Porthos, while the count was looking about, "are constructed in a ridiculously light manner. In my early days, when I used to sit down with far more energy than now, I do not remember ever to have broken a chair, except in taverns, with my arms." De Saint-Aignan smiled at this remark. "But," said Porthos, as he settled himself on a couch, which creaked but did not give way beneath his weight, "that unfortunately has nothing whatever to do with my present visit."

"Why unfortunately? Are you the bearer of a message of ill omen, Monsieur the Baron?"

"Of ill omen, — for a gentleman? Certainly not, Monsieur the Count," replied Porthos, nobly. "I have simply come to say that you have seriously offended a friend of mine."

"I, Monsieur?" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan, — "I have

offended a friend of yours, do you say? May I ask his name?"

"M. Raoul de Bragelonne."

"I have offended M. Raoul de Bragelonne!" cried De Saint-Aignan. "I really assure you, Monsieur, that it is quite impossible; for M. de Bragelonne, whom I know but very slightly, — nay, whom I know hardly at all, — is in England; and as I have not seen him for a long time past, I cannot possibly have offended him."

"M. de Bragelonne is in Paris, Monsieur the Count," said Porthos, perfectly unmoved; "and I repeat, it is quite certain you have offended him, since he himself told me you had. Yes, Monsieur, you have seriously offended him, mortally offended him, I repeat."

"It is impossible, Monsieur the Baron, I swear, — quite impossible."

"Besides," added Porthos, "you cannot be ignorant of the circumstance, since M. de Bragelonne informed me that he had already apprised you of it by a note."

"I give you my word of honor, Monsieur, that I have received no note whatever."

"This is most extraordinary," replied Porthos.

"I will convince you," said De Saint-Aignan, "that I have received nothing in any way from him;" and he rang the bell. "Basque," he said to the servant who entered, "how many letters or notes were sent here during my absence?"

"Three, Monsieur the Count, — a note from M. de Fiesque, one from Madame de Laferté, and a letter from M. de las Fuentes."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Monsieur the Count."

"Speak the truth before this gentleman, — the truth, you understand! I will take care you are not blamed."

"There was a note, also, from — from —"

"Well, from whom?"

"From Mademoiselle de la Val —"

"That is quite sufficient," interrupted Porthos. "I believe you, Monsieur the Count."

De Saint-Aignan dismissed the valet, and followed him to the door in order to close it after him; and when he had done so, looking straight before him, he happened to see in the keyhole of the adjoining apartment the paper which Bragelonne had slipped in there as he left. "What is this?" he said.

Porthos, who was sitting with his back to the room, turned round. "Oh! oh!" he said.

"A note in the keyhole!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan.

"That is not unlikely to be the one we want, Monsieur the Count," said Porthos.

De Saint-Aignan took out the paper. "A note from M. de Bragelonne!" he exclaimed.

"You see, Monsieur, I was right. Oh, when I say a thing —"

"Brought here by M. de Bragelonne himself," the count murmured, turning pale. "This is infamous! How could he possibly have come here?" and the count rang again.

"Who has been here during my absence with the king?"

"No one, Monsieur."

"That is impossible. Some one must have been here."

"No one could possibly have entered, Monsieur; since I kept the keys in my own pocket."

"And yet I find this letter in that lock yonder. Some one must have put it there; it could not have come alone."

Basque opened his arms, as if signifying the most absolute ignorance on the subject.

"Probably it was M. de Bragelonne himself who placed it there," said Porthos.

"In that case he must have entered here."

"Without doubt, Monsieur."

"How could that have been, since I have the key in my own pocket?" returned Basque, perseveringly.

De Saint-Aignan crumpled up the letter in his hand, after having read it. "There is something mysterious about this," he murmured, absorbed in thought.

Porthos left him to his reflections; but after a while returned to the mission he had undertaken. "Shall we return to our little affair?" he said, addressing De Saint-Aignan, as soon as the lackey had disappeared.

"I think I can now understand it, from this note which has arrived here in so singular a manner. M. de Bragelonne says that a friend will call."

"I am his friend, and am the one he alludes to."

"For the purpose of giving me a challenge?"

"Precisely."

"And he complains that I have offended him?"

"Mortally so."

"In what way, may I ask?—for his conduct is so mysterious that it at least needs some explanation."

"Monsieur," replied Porthos, "my friend cannot but be right; and so far as his conduct is concerned, if it be mysterious, as you say, you have only yourself to blame for it."

Porthos pronounced these words with an amount of confidence which for a man who was unaccustomed to his ways must have indicated an infinity of sense.

"Mystery? Be it so; but what is the mystery about?" said De Saint-Aignan.

"You will think it best, perhaps," Porthos replied, with a low bow, "that I do not enter into particulars, and for excellent reasons."

"Oh, I perfectly understand you! We will touch very lightly upon it, then. So speak, Monsieur; I am listening."

"In the first place, Monsieur," said Porthos, "you have changed your apartments."

"Yes, that is quite true," said De Saint-Aignan.

"You admit it, then," said Porthos, with an air of satisfaction.

"Admit it! of course I admit it. Why should I not admit it, do you suppose?"

"You have admitted it. Very good," said Porthos, lifting up one finger.

"But how can my having moved my lodgings have done M. de Bragelonne any harm? Have the goodness to tell me that, for I positively do not comprehend a word of what you are saying."

Porthos stopped him, and then said with great gravity: "Monsieur, this is the first of M. de Bragelonne's complaints against you. If he makes a complaint, it is because he feels himself insulted."

De Saint-Aignan began to beat his foot impatiently on the floor. "This looks like a bad quarrel," he said.

"No one can possibly have a bad quarrel with the Vicomte de Bragelonne," returned Porthos; "but, at all events, you have nothing to add on the subject of your changing your apartments, I suppose?"

"Nothing. And what is the next point?"

"Ah, the next! You will observe, Monsieur, that the one I have already mentioned is a most serious injury, to which you have given no answer, or rather have answered very indifferently. So, Monsieur, you change your lodg-

ings; that offends M. de Bragelonne, and you do not attempt to excuse yourself? Very well!"

"What!" cried De Saint-Aignan, who was irritated by the coolness of his visitor, — "what! Am I to consult M. de Bragelonne whether I am to move or not? You can hardly be serious, Monsieur."

"Absolutely necessary, Monsieur; but, under any circumstances, you will admit that it is nothing in comparison with the second ground of complaint."

"Well, what is that?"

Porthos assumed a very serious expression as he said, "How about the trap-door, Monsieur?"

De Saint-Aignan turned exceedingly pale. He pushed back his chair so abruptly that Porthos, simple as he was, perceived that the blow had told. "The trap-door?" murmured De Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, Monsieur, explain that if you can," said Porthos, shaking his head.

De Saint-Aignan held down his head. "Oh, I have been betrayed," he murmured; "everything is known!"

"Everything," replied Porthos, who knew nothing.

"You see me overwhelmed," pursued De Saint-Aignan, — "overwhelmed to such a degree that I hardly know what I am about."

"A guilty conscience, Monsieur! Your affair is a bad one."

"Monsieur!"

"And when the public shall learn all about it, and will judge —"

"Oh, Monsieur!" exclaimed the count, hurriedly, "such a secret ought not to be known, even by one's confessor!"

"That we will think about," said Porthos; "the secret will not go far, in fact."

"But, Monsieur," returned De Saint-Aignan, "is M. de Bragelonne, in penetrating the secret, aware of the danger to which he exposes himself and others?"

"M. de Bragelonne incurs no danger, Monsieur, nor does he fear any either, — as you, if it please Heaven, will find out very soon."

"This fellow is a perfect madman," thought De Saint-Aignan. "What, in Heaven's name, does he want?" He then said aloud: "Come, Monsieur, let us hush up this affair."

"You forget the portrait!" said Porthos, in a voice of thunder, which made the count's blood freeze in his veins.

As the portrait in question was La Vallière's portrait, and as no mistake could any longer exist on the subject, De Saint-Aignan's eyes were completely opened. "Ah," he exclaimed, — "ah, Monsieur, I remember now that M. de Bragelonne was engaged to be married to her."

Porthos assumed an imposing air — all the majesty of ignorance, in fact — as he said: "It matters nothing whatever to me, nor to yourself indeed, whether or not my friend was, as you say, engaged to be married. I am even astonished that you should have made use of so indiscreet a remark. It may possibly do your cause harm, Monsieur."

"Monsieur," replied De Saint-Aignan, "you are the incarnation of intelligence, delicacy, and loyalty of feeling united. I see the whole matter now clearly enough."

"So much the better," said Porthos.

"And," pursued De Saint-Aignan, "you have made me comprehend it in the most ingenious and the most delicate manner possible. Thank you, Monsieur, thank you." Porthos drew himself up. "Only, now that I know everything, permit me to explain —"

Porthos shook his head as a man who does not wish to hear; but De Saint-Aignan continued: "I am in despair, I assure you, at all that has happened; but how would you have acted in my place? Come, between ourselves, tell me what would you have done?"

Porthos raised his head. "There is no question at all of what I should have done, young man; you have now," he said, "been made acquainted with the three causes of complaint against you, I believe?"

"As for the first, my change of rooms, — and I now address myself to you, as a man of honor and of great intelligence, — could I, when the desire of so august a personage was so urgently expressed that I should move, ought I to have disobeyed?"

Porthos was about to speak, but De Saint-Aignan did not give him time to answer. "Ah! my frankness, I see, convinces you," he said, interpreting the movement in his own interest. "You perceive that I am right?"

Porthos did not reply. De Saint-Aignan continued: "I pass to that unfortunate trap-door," placing his hand on Porthos's arm, — "that trap-door, the occasion and the means of so much unhappiness, and which was constructed for — you know what. Well, then, in plain truth, do you suppose that it was I who, of my own accord, in such a place too, had that trap-door made? Oh, no! you do not believe it; and here, again, you feel, you guess, you understand the influence of a will superior to my own. You can conceive the infatuation, — I do not speak of love, that madness irresistible! But, thank Heaven! happily the affair is with a man who has so much sensitiveness of feeling. If it were not so, indeed, what an amount of misery and scandal would fall upon her, poor girl! and upon him — whom I will not name."

Porthos, confused and bewildered by the eloquence and gestures of De Saint-Aignan, made a thousand efforts to stem this torrent of words, of which, by the by, he did not understand a single one; he remained upright and motionless on his seat, and that was all he could do.

De Saint-Aignan continued, and gave a new inflection to his voice, and an increasing vehemence to his gesture: "As for the portrait, — for I readily believe the portrait is the principal cause of complaint, — tell me candidly if you think me to blame? Who was it that wished to have her portrait? Was it I? Who is in love with her? Is it I? Who desires her? who has won her? Is it I? No, a thousand times no! I know M. de Bragelonne must be in a state of despair; I know these misfortunes are most cruel. But I, too, am suffering as well; and yet there is no possibility of offering any resistance. If he struggles, he will be derided; if he resists, he is lost. You will tell me, I know, that despair is madness; but you are reasonable, — you have understood me. I perceive by your serious, thoughtful, embarrassed air, even, that the importance of the situation in which we are placed has not escaped you. Return, therefore, to M. de Bragelonne; thank him — as I have indeed reason to thank him — for having chosen as an intermediary a man of your merit. Believe me that I shall, on my side, preserve an eternal gratitude for the man who has so ingeniously, so cleverly corrected the misunderstanding between us. And since ill-luck would have it that the secret should be known to four instead of to three, why, this secret, which might make the most ambitious man's fortune, I am delighted to share with you, Monsieur; from the bottom of my heart I am delighted at it. From this very moment you can make use of me as you please; I place myself entirely at your mercy. What can I possibly do for you?

What can I solicit, nay, require even? Speak, Monsieur, speak!"

According to the familiarly friendly fashion of that period, De Saint-Aignan threw his arms round Porthos, and clasped him tenderly in his embrace. Porthos allowed him to do this with the most complete indifference.

"Speak!" resumed De Saint-Aignan; "what do you require?"

"Monsieur," said Porthos, "I have a horse below; be good enough to mount him. He is a very good one, and will play you no tricks."

"Mount on horseback! What for?" inquired De Saint-Aignan, with no little curiosity.

"To accompany me where M. de Bragelonne is awaiting us."

"Ah! he wishes to speak to me, I suppose? I can well believe that; he wishes to have the details, very likely. Alas! it is a very delicate matter; but at the present moment I cannot, for the king is waiting for me."

"The king will wait," said Porthos.

"But where is M. de Bragelonne expecting me?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"Ah, indeed! but are we going to laugh over the affair when we get there?"

"I don't think it likely, — not I, at least;" and the face of Porthos assumed a stern hardness of expression. "The Minimes is a rendezvous for duels."

"Very well; what, then, have I to do at the Minimes?"

Porthos slowly drew his sword, and said, "That is the length of my friend's sword."

"Why, the man is mad!" cried De Saint-Aignan.

The color mounted to Porthos's face, as he replied: "If I had not the honor of being in your own apartment, Monsieur, and of representing M. de Bragelonne's interests, I

would throw you out of the window. It will be merely a pleasure postponed, and you will lose nothing by waiting. Will you come to the Minimes, Monsieur?"

"Eh!"

"Will you go thither of your own free will?"

"But —"

"I will carry you if you do not come. Take care!"

"Basque!" cried M. de Saint-Aignan. As soon as Basque appeared, he said, "The king wishes to see Monsieur the Count."

"That is very different," said Porthos; "the king's service before everything else. We will wait there until this evening, Monsieur." And saluting De Saint-Aignan with his usual courtesy, Porthos left the room, delighted at having arranged another affair.

De Saint-Aignan looked after him as he left; and then hastily putting on his coat again, he ran off, arranging his dress as he went along, muttering to himself: "The Minimes! the Minimes! We will see how the king will like this challenge; for it is for him, after all, *pardieu!*"

CHAPTER LXIII.

RIVAL POLITICS.

On his return from the ride which had been so prolific in poetical effusions, and in which every one had paid tribute to the Muses, as the poets of the period used to say, the king found M. Fouquet waiting for an audience. Behind the king came M. Colbert, who had met the king in the corridor, as if on the watch for him, and followed him like a jealous and watchful shadow, — M. Colbert, with his square head, and his vulgar and untidy though rich costume, which gave him some resemblance to a Flemish gentleman after drinking beer. Fouquet, at the sight of his enemy, remained unmoved, and during the whole of the scene which followed observed that line of conduct so difficult to a man of refinement whose heart is filled with contempt, but who wishes to suppress every indication of it, lest he may do his adversary too much honor. Colbert did not conceal his insolent joy. In his opinion, M. Fouquet's was a game very badly played and hopelessly lost, although not yet finished. Colbert belonged to that school of politicians who think cleverness alone worthy of their admiration, and success the only thing worth caring for. Colbert, moreover, who was not simply an envious and jealous man, but who had the king's interest really at heart, because he was thoroughly imbued with the highest sense of probity in all matters of figures and accounts, could well afford to assign as a pretext for his conduct, that in hating and doing his utmost to ruin M. Fouquet

he had nothing in view but the welfare of the State and the dignity of the crown.

None of these details escaped Fouquet's observation. Through his enemy's thick, bushy brows, and despite the restless movement of his eyelids, he could, by merely looking at his eyes, penetrate to the very bottom of Colbert's heart; he saw, then, all there was in that heart, — hatred and triumph. But as he wished, while observing everything, to remain himself impenetrable, he composed his features, smiled with that charmingly sympathetic smile which was peculiarly his own, and saluted the king with the most dignified and graceful ease and elasticity of manner. "Sire," he said, "I perceive by your Majesty's joyous air that you have had a pleasant ride."

"Charming, indeed, Monsieur the Superintendent, charming! You were very wrong not to come with us as I invited you to do."

"I was working, Sire," replied the superintendent, who did not take the trouble to turn aside his head even in recognition of Colbert's presence.

"Ah! M. Fouquet," cried the king, "there is nothing like the country. I should be delighted to live in the country always, in the open air and under the trees."

"Oh! your Majesty is not yet weary of the throne, I trust?" said Fouquet.

"No; but thrones of soft turf are very delightful."

"Your Majesty gratifies my utmost wishes in speaking in that manner, for I have a request to submit to you."

"On whose behalf, Monsieur?"

"On behalf of the nymphs of Vaux, Sire."

"Ah! ah!" said Louis XIV.

"Your Majesty once deigned to make me a promise," said Fouquet.

"Yes, I remember it."

"The *fête* at Vaux, the celebrated *fête*, is it not, Sire?" said Colbert, endeavoring to show his importance by taking part in the conversation.

Fouquet, with the profoundest contempt, did not take the slightest notice of the remark, as if, so far as he was concerned, Colbert had not spoken. "Your Majesty is aware," he said, "that I destine my estate at Vaux to receive the most amiable of princes, the most powerful of monarchs."

"I have given you my promise, Monsieur," said Louis XIV., smiling; "and a king never departs from his word."

"And I have come now, Sire, to inform your Majesty that I am ready to obey your orders in every respect."

"Do you promise me many wonders, Monsieur the Superintendent?" said Louis, looking at Colbert.

"Wonders? Oh, no, Sire! I do not undertake that; but I hope to be able to procure your Majesty a little pleasure, perhaps even a little forgetfulness of the cares of State."

"Nay, nay, M. Fouquet," returned the king; "I insist upon the word 'wonders.' Oh, you are a magician! We know your power; we know that you could find gold, even were there none in the world. And, in fact, people say you make it."

Fouquet felt that the shot was discharged from a double quiver, and that the king had launched an arrow from his own bow as well as one from Colbert's. "Oh!" said he, laughingly, "the people know perfectly well out of what mine I procure the gold; they know it only too well, perhaps. Besides," he added proudly, "I can assure your Majesty that the gold destined to pay the expenses of the *fête* at Vaux will cost neither blood nor tears; hard labor it may, perhaps, but that can be paid for."

Louis remained silent; he wished to look at Colbert. Colbert, too, wished to reply; but a glance as swift as an eagle's, — a proud, loyal, king-like glance, indeed, — which Fouquet darted at the latter, arrested the words upon his lips. The king, who had by this time recovered his self-possession, turned towards Fouquet, saying, "I presume, therefore, I am now to consider myself formally invited?"

"Yes, Sire, if it pleases your Majesty."

"For what day?"

"Any day your Majesty may find most convenient."

"You speak like an enchanter who improvises, M. Fouquet. I could not say so much, indeed."

"Your Majesty will do, whenever you please, everything that a monarch can and ought to do. The King of France has servants at his bidding who are able to do anything on his behalf, to accomplish everything to gratify his pleasures."

Colbert tried to look at the superintendent in order to see whether this remark was an approach to less hostile sentiments on his part. But Fouquet had not even looked at his enemy; so far as he was concerned, Colbert did not exist.

"Very good, then," said the king; "will a week hence suit you?"

"Perfectly well, Sire."

"This is Tuesday; if I give you until next Sunday week, will that be sufficient?"

"The delay which your Majesty deigns to accord me will greatly aid the various works which my architects have in hand for the purpose of adding to the amusement of your Majesty and your friends."

"By the by, speaking of my friends," resumed the king; "how do you intend to treat them?"

"The king is master everywhere, Sire; your Majesty

will draw up your own list and give your own orders. All those you may deign to invite will be my guests, — my honored guests indeed."

"I thank you!" returned the king, touched by the noble thought expressed in so noble a tone.

Fouquet therefore took leave of Louis XIV., after a few words had been added with regard to the details of certain matters of business. He felt that Colbert would remain behind with the king, that they would both converse about him, and that neither of them would spare him in the least degree. The satisfaction of being able to give a last and terrible blow to his enemy seemed to him almost like a compensation for everything to which they were about to subject him. He turned back again immediately, when he had already reached the door, and addressing the king, "Pardon, Sire," said he, — "pardon!"

"Pardon for what?" said the king, graciously.

"For a serious fault which I committed unawares."

"A fault! You! Ah, M. Fouquet, I shall be unable to do otherwise than forgive you. In what way or against whom have you been found wanting?"

"Against all propriety, Sire. I forgot to inform your Majesty of a circumstance of considerable importance."

"What is it?"

Colbert trembled; he expected a denunciation. His conduct had been unmasked. A single syllable from Fouquet, a single proof formally advanced, and before the youthful loyalty of Louis XIV. Colbert's favor would disappear at once. The latter trembled, therefore, lest so daring a blow might not overthrow his whole scaffold. In point of fact, the opportunity was so admirably suited to be taken advantage of, that a skilful player like Aramis would not have let it slip. "Sire," said Fouquet, with an easy air, "since you have had the kindness to forgive

me, I am indifferent about my confession: this morning I sold one of the official appointments I hold."

"One of your appointments?" said the king; "which?"

Colbert turned livid. "That which conferred upon me, Sire, a grand gown and an air of gravity, — the appointment of procureur-général."

The king involuntarily uttered a loud exclamation and looked at Colbert, who with his face bedewed with perspiration felt almost on the point of fainting. "To whom have you sold this appointment, M. Fouquet?" inquired the king.

Colbert was obliged to lean against the side of the fireplace.

"To a councillor belonging to the parliament, Sire, whose name is Vanel."

"Vanel?"

"A friend of the intendant Colbert," added Fouquet, letting every word fall from his lips with inimitable nonchalance, and with an admirably assumed expression of forgetfulness and ignorance which neither painter, actor, nor poet could reproduce with brush, gesture, or pen. Then having finished, having overwhelmed Colbert beneath the weight of this superiority, the superintendent again saluted the king and quitted the room, partially revenged by the stupefaction of the king and the humiliation of the favorite.

"Is it really possible," said the king, as soon as Fouquet had disappeared, "that he has sold that office?"

"Yes, Sire," said Colbert, meaningly.

"He must be mad," the king added.

Colbert this time did not reply; he had penetrated the king's thought. That thought promised him revenge. His hatred was augmented by jealousy; and a threat of disgrace was now added to the plan he had arranged for

his ruin. Colbert felt assured that for the future, as between Louis XIV. and himself, his hostile ideas would meet with no obstacles, and that at the first fault committed by Fouquet which could be laid hold of as a pretext, the chastisement impending over him would be precipitated. Fouquet had thrown aside his weapons of defence; Hate and Jealousy had picked them up.

Colbert was invited by the king to the *fête* at Vaux; he bowed like a man confident in himself, and accepted the invitation with the air of one who confers a favor. The king was about writing down De Saint-Aignan's name on his list of invitations, when the usher announced the Comte de Saint-Aignan. As soon as the royal "Mercury" entered, Colbert discreetly withdrew.

CHAPTER LXIV.

RIVAL LOVERS.

De Saint-Aignan had quitted Louis XIV. hardly two hours before; but in the first effervescence of his affection, whenever Louis XIV. did not see La Vallière he was obliged to talk of her. Now, the only person with whom he could speak about her at his ease was De Saint-Aignan, and that person had therefore become indispensable to him.

"Ah! is that you, Count?" the king exclaimed, as soon as he perceived him, — doubly delighted, not only to see him again, but also to get rid of Colbert, whose scowling face always put him out of humor, — "so much the better. I am very glad to see you; you will make one of the travelling-party, I suppose?"

"Of what travelling-party are you speaking, Sire?" inquired De Saint-Aignan.

"The one we are making up to go to the *fête* the superintendent is about to give at Vaux. Ah! De Saint-Aignan, you will at last see a *fête*, a royal *fête*, by the side of which all our amusements at Fontainebleau are petty, contemptible affairs."

"At Vaux? — the superintendent going to give a *fête* in your Majesty's honor? Nothing more than that!"

"'Nothing more than that!' do you say? It is very diverting to find you treating it with so much disdain. Are you, who express such indifference on the subject, aware that as soon as it is known that M. Fouquet is

going to receive me at Vaux next Sunday week, people will be striving their very utmost to get invited to the *fête*? I repeat, De Saint-Aignan, you shall be one of the invited guests."

"Very well, Sire; unless I shall in the mean time have undertaken a longer and less agreeable journey."

"What journey?"

"The one across the Styx, Sire."

"Bah!" said Louis XIV., laughing.

"No, seriously, Sire," replied De Saint-Aignan, "I am invited there; and in such a way, in truth, that I hardly know what to say or how to act in order to refuse it."

"I do not understand you. I know that you are in a poetical vein; but try not to sink from Apollo to Phœbus."

"Very well; if your Majesty will deign to listen to me, I will not keep you in suspense any longer."

"Speak!"

"Your Majesty knows the Baron du Vallon?"

"Yes, indeed, — a good servant to my father, the late king, and an admirable companion at table; for I think you are referring to him who dined with us at Fontainebleau?"

"Precisely; but you have omitted to add to his other qualifications, Sire, that he is a most charming killer of people."

"What! does M. du Vallon wish to kill you?"

"Or to get me killed, — which is the same thing."

"Bless my heart!"

"Do not laugh, Sire, for I am not saying a word that is not the exact truth."

"And you say he wishes to get you killed?"

"That is that excellent person's present idea."

"Be easy; I will defend you, if he be in the wrong."

"Ah! there is an 'if.'"

"Of course! Answer me as candidly as if it were some one else's affair instead of your own, my poor De Saint-Aignan: is he right or wrong?"

"Your Majesty shall be the judge."

"What have you done to him?"

"To him, personally, nothing at all; but it seems I have to one of his friends."

"It is all the same. Is his friend one of the celebrated 'four'?"

"No! It is only the son of one of the celebrated 'four.'"

"What have you done to the son? Come, tell me."

"Why, I have helped some one to take his mistress from him."

"You confess it, then?"

"I cannot help confessing it, for it is true."

"In that case you are wrong."

"Ah! I am wrong?"

"Yes; and, my faith, if he kills you —"

"Well?"

"Well, he will do what is right."

"Ah! that is your Majesty's way of reasoning, then?"

"Do you think it a bad way?"

"It is a very expeditious way, at all events."

"'Good justice is prompt;' so my grandfather Henry IV. used to say."

"In that case your Majesty will immediately sign my adversary's pardon, for he is now waiting for me at the Minimes to kill me."

"His name, and a parchment!"

"There is a parchment upon your Majesty's table; and as for his name —"

"Well, what is it?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, Sire."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne!" exclaimed the king, changing from a fit of laughter to the most profound stupor; and then after a moment's silence, while he wiped his forehead, which was bedewed with perspiration, he again murmured, "Bragelonne!"

"No other than he, Sire."

"Bragelonne, who was affianced to —"

"Yes, Sire."

"He was in London, however."

"Yes; but I can assure you, Sire, he is there no longer."

"Is he in Paris?"

"He is at the Minimes, Sire, where he is waiting for me, as I have already had the honor of telling you."

"Does he know all?"

"Yes; and many things besides. Perhaps your Majesty would like to look at the letter I have received from him;" and De Saint-Aignan drew from his pocket the note with which we are already acquainted. "When your Majesty has read the letter, I will tell you how it reached me."

The king read it in great agitation, and immediately said, "Well?"

"Well, Sire; your Majesty knows a certain carved lock, closing a certain door of ebony-wood, which separates a certain apartment from a certain blue and white sanctuary?"

"Of course! Louise's boudoir."

"Yes, Sire. Well, it was in the key-hole of that lock that I found that note. Who placed it there? Either M. de Bragelonne, or the devil himself; but inasmuch as the note smells of amber and not of sulphur, I conclude that it must be, not the devil, but M. de Bragelonne."

Louis bent down his head, and seemed absorbed in sad and melancholy reflections. Perhaps something like remorse was at that moment passing through his heart. "Oh!" he said, "that secret discovered!"

"Sire, I shall do my utmost that the secret dies in the breast of the man who possesses it," said De Saint-Aignan, in a tone of bravado, as he moved towards the door; but a gesture of the king made him pause.

"Where are you going?" he inquired.

"Where I am waited for, Sire."

"What for?"

"To fight, in all probability."

"You fight!" exclaimed the king. "One moment, if you please, Monsieur the Count!"

De Saint-Aignan shook his head, as a rebellious child does whenever any one interferes to prevent him from throwing himself into a well or playing with a knife. "But yet, Sire —" he said.

"In the first place," continued the king, "I require to be enlightened a little."

"Upon that point, if your Majesty will be pleased to interrogate me," replied De Saint-Aignan, "I will throw what light I can."

"Who told you that M. de Bragelonne had penetrated into that room?"

"The letter which I found in the key-hole told me so."

"Who told you that it was De Bragelonne who put it there?"

"Who but himself would have dared to undertake such a mission?"

"You are right. How was he able to get into your rooms?"

"Ah! that is very serious, inasmuch as all the doors

were closed, and my lackey, Basque, had the keys in his pocket."

"Your lackey must have been bribed."

"Impossible, Sire; for if he had been bribed, those who did so would not have sacrificed the poor fellow, whom it is not unlikely they might want to turn to further use by and by, in showing so clearly that it was he of whom they had made use."

"Quite true. And now there remains but one conjecture."

"Let us see, Sire, if it is the same that has presented itself to my mind."

"That he effected an entrance by means of the staircase."

"Alas! Sire, that seems to me more than probable."

"There is no doubt that some one sold the secret of the trap-door."

"Either sold it or gave it."

"Why do you make that distinction?"

"Because there are certain persons, Sire, who being above the price of a treason give, and do not sell."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Sire, your Majesty's mind is too clear-sighted not to guess what I mean, and you will save me the embarrassment of naming any one."

"You are right: you mean Madame!"

"Ah!" said De Saint-Aignan.

"Madame, whose suspicions were aroused by your changing your lodgings."

"Madame, who has keys of the apartments of her maids of honor, and is powerful enough to discover what no one but yourself or she would be able to discover."

"And you suppose, then, that my sister has entered into an alliance with Bragelonne?"

"Eh! eh! Sire—"

"So far as to inform him of all the details of the affair?"

"Perhaps even further still."

"Further? What do you mean?"

"Perhaps to the point of going with him."

"Which way, — through your own apartments?"

"You think it impossible, Sire? Well, listen to me! Your Majesty knows that Madame is very fond of perfumes?"

"Yes, she acquired that taste from my mother."

"Vervain particularly."

"Yes, it is the scent she prefers to all others."

"Very good, Sire! my apartments smell very strongly of vervain."

The king remained silent and thoughtful for a few moments, and then resumed: "But why should Madame take Bragelonne's part against me?" De Saint-Aignan could very easily have replied: "A woman's jealousy!" In his question the king had probed his friend to the bottom of his heart to ascertain if he had learned the secret of his flirtation with his sister-in-law. But De Saint-Aignan was not an ordinary courtier; he did not lightly run the risk of finding out family secrets; and he was too good a friend of the Muses not to think very frequently of poor Ovidius Naso, whose eyes shed so many tears in expiation of his crime for having once beheld something, one hardly knows what, in the palace of Augustus. He therefore passed by Madame's secret very skilfully. But since he had exhibited his sagacity in proving Madame's presence in his rooms with Bragelonne, it was now necessary for him to pay interest on that self-conceit, and reply clearly to the question, "Why has Madame taken Bragelonne's part against me?"

"Why?" replied De Saint-Aignan. "Your Majesty

forgets, I presume, that the Comte de Guiche is the intimate friend of the Vicomte de Bragelonne?"

"I do not see the connection, however," said the king.

"Ah! I beg your pardon then, Sire; but I thought the Comte de Guiche was a very great friend of Madame."

"Quite true," the king returned. "There is no occasion to search any further; the blow came from that direction."

"And is not your Majesty of the opinion that in order to ward it off it will be necessary to deal another blow?"

"Yes; but not one of the kind given in the Bois de Vincennes," replied the king.

"You forget, Sire," said De Saint-Aignan, "that I am a gentleman, and that I have been challenged."

"The challenge neither concerns nor was it intended for you."

"But it is I who have been expected at the Minimes, Sire, during the last hour and more; and I shall be dishonored if I do not go there."

"The first honor and duty of a gentleman is obedience to his sovereign."

"Sire!"

"I order you to remain."

"Sire!"

"Obey, Monsieur!"

"As your Majesty pleases."

"Besides, I wish to have the whole of this affair explained; I wish to know how it is that I have been so insolently trifled with as to have the sanctuary of my affection pried into. It is not you, De Saint-Aignan, who ought to punish those who have acted in this manner; for it is not your honor they have attacked, but my own."

"I implore your Majesty not to overwhelm M. de Bragelonne with your wrath; for although in the whole of this

affair he may have shown himself deficient in prudence, he has not been so in his feelings of loyalty."

"Enough! I shall know how to decide between the just and the unjust, even in the height of my anger. But take care that not a word of this is breathed to Madame!"

"But what am I to do with regard to M. de Bragelonne? He will be seeking me in every direction, and —"

"I shall either have spoken to him, or taken care that he has been spoken to before the evening is over."

"Let me once more entreat your Majesty to be indulgent towards him."

"I have been indulgent long enough, Count," said Louis XIV., frowning; "it is time to show certain persons that I am master in my own palace."

The king had hardly pronounced these words, which betokened that a fresh feeling of dissatisfaction was mingled with the remembrance of an old one, when the usher appeared at the door of the cabinet. "What is the matter," inquired the king, "and why do you presume to come when I have not summoned you?"

"Sire," said the usher, "your Majesty desired me to permit M. le Comte de la Fère to pass freely at any time when he might wish to speak to your Majesty."

"Well?"

"M. le Comte de la Fère is now waiting to see your Majesty."

The king and De Saint-Aignan at this reply exchanged a look which betrayed more uneasiness than surprise. Louis hesitated for a moment, but almost immediately forming a resolution, he said: "Go, De Saint-Aignan, and find Louise; inform her of the plot against us. Do not let her be ignorant that Madame is beginning again her persecutions, and that she has set to work those who would have done better had they remained neutral."

"Sire —"

"If Louise gets nervous and frightened, reassure her; tell her that the king's love is an impenetrable shield over her. If, as I suspect is the case, she already knows everything, or if she has already been herself subjected to an attack, tell her, be sure to tell her, De Saint-Aignan," added the king, trembling with passion, — "tell her, I say, that this time, instead of defending her, I will avenge her, and that too so terribly that no one will in future even dare to raise his eyes towards her."

"Is that all, Sire?"

"Yes; all. Go quickly, and remain faithful, — you who live in the midst of this hell without having, like myself, the hope of paradise."

De Saint-Aignan almost exhausted himself in protestations of devotion, took the king's hand, kissed it, and left the room radiant with delight.

CHAPTER LXV.

KING AND NOBILITY.

THE king endeavored to recover his self-possession as quickly as possible, in order to meet M. de la Fère with an undisturbed countenance. He clearly saw that it was not mere chance which had induced the count's visit. He had a vague impression of the serious import of that visit; but he felt that to a man of Athos's tone of mind, to a person so distinguished, nothing disagreeable or disordered should be presented. As soon as the king had satisfied himself that so far as appearances were concerned he was perfectly calm again, he gave directions to the ushers to introduce the count.

A few minutes afterwards Athos, in full court dress and with his breast covered with the orders that he alone had the right to wear at the Court of France, presented himself with so grave and solemn an air that the king perceived at the first glance that he had not been mistaken in his anticipations. Louis advanced a step towards the count, and with a smile held out his hand to him, over which Athos bowed with the air of the deepest respect.

"M. le Comte de la Fère," said the king, rapidly, "you are so seldom here that it is a very great happiness to see you."

Athos bowed and replied, "I should wish always to enjoy the happiness of being near your Majesty."

That reply, made in that tone, evidently signified, "I should wish to be one of your Majesty's advisers, to save

you from the commission of faults." The king so understood it, and determined in this man's presence to preserve all the advantages which could be derived from his command over himself as well as from his rank and position.

"I see you have something to say to me," he said.

"Had it not been so, I should not have presumed to present myself before your Majesty."

"Speak quickly; I am anxious to satisfy you," returned the king, seating himself.

"I am persuaded," replied Athos, in a slightly agitated tone of voice, "that your Majesty will give me every satisfaction."

"Ah!" said the king, with a certain haughtiness of manner, "you have come to lodge a complaint here, then?"

"It would be a complaint," returned Athos, "only in the event of your Majesty — But if you will deign to permit me, Sire, I will begin the conversation at the beginning."

"I am listening."

"Your Majesty will remember that at the period of the Duke of Buckingham's departure I had the honor of an interview with you."

"At or about that period I think I remember you did; only, with regard to the subject of the conversation, I have quite forgotten it."

Athos started, as he replied: "I shall have the honor to recall it to your Majesty. It was with regard to a demand which I addressed to you respecting a marriage which M. de Bragelonne wished to contract with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Ah!" thought the king, "we have come to it now. I remember," he said, aloud.

"At that period," pursued Athos, "your Majesty was so kind and generous towards M. de Bragelonne and my-

self that not a single word which then fell from your lips has escaped my memory; and when I asked your Majesty to accord me Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hand for M. de Bragelonne, you refused."

"Quite true," said Louis, dryly.

"Alleging," Athos hastened to say, "that the young lady had no position in society."

Louis could hardly force himself to listen patiently.

"That," added Athos, "she had but little fortune."

The king threw himself back in his arm-chair.

"That her extraction was indifferent."

A renewed impatience on the part of the king.

"And little beauty," added Athos, pitilessly.

This last bolt buried itself deep in the king's heart, and made him almost bound from his seat.

"You have a good memory, Monsieur," he said.

"I invariably have, on all occasions when I have had the distinguished honor of an interview with your Majesty," retorted the count, without being in the least disconcerted.

"Very good; it is admitted I said all that."

"And I thanked your Majesty, because those words testified an interest in M. de Bragelonne, which did him much honor."

"And you may possibly remember," said the king, very deliberately, "that you had the greatest repugnance to this marriage?"

"Quite true, Sire."

"And that you solicited my permission against your own inclination?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And, finally, I remember also, — for I have a memory nearly as good as your own, — I remember, I say, that you observed at the time: 'I do not believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière loves M. de Bragelonne.' Is that true?"

The blow told well, but Athos did not shrink. "Sire," he said, "I have already begged your Majesty's forgiveness; but there are certain particulars in that conversation which will be intelligible in the *dénouement*."

"Well, what is the *dénouement*, Monsieur?"

"This: your Majesty then said that you would defer the marriage out of regard for M. de Bragelonne's own interests."

The king remained silent.

"M. de Bragelonne is now so exceedingly unhappy that he cannot any longer defer asking your Majesty for a solution of the matter."

The king turned pale; Athos looked at him with fixed attention.

"And what," said the king, with considerable hesitation, "does M. de Bragelonne request?"

"Precisely the very thing that I came to ask your Majesty for at my last audience; namely, your Majesty's consent to his marriage."

The king remained silent.

"The obstacles in the way are all now quite removed for us," continued Athos. "Mademoiselle de la Vallière, without fortune, birth, or beauty, is not the less on that account the only good match in the world for M. de Bragelonne, since he loves this young girl."

The king pressed his hands impatiently together.

"Does your Majesty hesitate?" inquired the count, without losing a particle either of his firmness or his politeness.

"I do not hesitate, — I refuse," replied the king.

Athos paused a moment, as if to collect himself. "I have had the honor," he said in a mild tone, "to observe to your Majesty that no obstacle now interferes with M. de Bragelonne's affections, and that his determination seems unalterable."

"There is my will, — and that is an obstacle, I should imagine!"

"That is the most serious of all," Athos replied quickly.

"Ah!"

"And may we therefore be permitted to ask your Majesty, with the greatest humility, for your reason for this refusal?"

"The reason! A question to me!" exclaimed the king.

"A demand, Sire!"

The king, leaning with both his hands upon the table, said in a deep tone of concentrated passion: "You have lost all recollection of what is usual at court. At court no one questions the king."

"Very true, Sire; but if men do not question, they conjecture."

"Conjecture! What may that mean, Monsieur?"

"Almost always the conjecture of the subject impugns the frankness of the king."

"Monsieur!"

"And a want of confidence on the part of the subject," pursued Athos, intrepidly.

"You are forgetting yourself," said the king, hurried away by his anger in spite of his control over himself.

"Sire, I am obliged to seek elsewhere for what I thought I should find in your Majesty. Instead of obtaining a reply from you, I am compelled to make one for myself."

The king rose. "Monsieur the Count," he said, "I have now given you all the time I had at my disposal."

This was a dismissal.

"Sire," replied the count, "I have not yet had time to tell your Majesty what I came with the express object of saying, and I so rarely see your Majesty that I ought to avail myself of the opportunity."

"Just now you spoke of conjectures; you are now becoming offensive, Monsieur."

"Oh, Sire, offend your Majesty! I? Never! All my life have I maintained that kings are above all other men, not only in rank and power, but in nobleness of heart and dignity of mind. I never can bring myself to believe that my sovereign — he who passed his word to me — did so with a mental reservation."

"What do you mean? What mental reservation?"

"I will explain my meaning," said Athos, coldly. "If in refusing Mademoiselle de la Vallière to M. de Bragelonne your Majesty had some other object in view than the happiness and fortune of the viscount — "

"You perceive, Monsieur, that you are offending me."

"If in requiring the viscount to delay his marriage your Majesty's only object was to remove the gentleman to whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière was engaged — "

"Monsieur! Monsieur!"

"I have heard it said so in every direction, Sire. Your Majesty's love for Mademoiselle de la Vallière is spoken of on all sides."

The king tore his gloves, which he had been biting for some time. "Woe to those," he cried, "who interfere in my affairs! I have chosen my course; I will crush all obstacles."

"What obstacles?" said Athos.

The king stopped short, like a runaway horse whose bit being turned in his mouth bruises his palate. "I love Mademoiselle de la Vallière," he said suddenly, with nobleness and with passion.

"But," interrupted Athos, "that does not preclude your Majesty from allowing M. de Bragelonne to marry Mademoiselle de la Vallière. The sacrifice is worthy of so great a monarch; it is fully merited by M. de Bragelonne,

who has already rendered great service to your Majesty, and who may well be regarded as a brave and worthy man. Your Majesty, therefore, in renouncing the affection you entertain, offers a proof at once of generosity, gratitude, and good policy."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière does not love M. de Bragelonne," said the king, hoarsely.

"Does your Majesty know that to be the case?" remarked Athos, with a searching look.

"I do know it."

"Within a short time, then; for doubtless had your Majesty known it when I first preferred my request, you would have taken the trouble to inform me of it."

"Within a short time."

Athos remained silent for a moment, and then resumed: "In that case I do not understand why your Majesty should have sent M. de Bragelonne to London. That exile, and with good reason, is a matter of astonishment to all who love the honor of the king."

"Who presumes to speak of my honor, M. de la Fère?"

"The king's honor, Sire, is made up of the honor of his whole nobility. Whenever the king offends one of his gentlemen, — that is, whenever he deprives him of the smallest particle of his honor, — it is from him, from the king himself, that that portion of honor is stolen."

"M. de la Fère!" said the king, haughtily.

"Sire, you sent M. de Bragelonne to London either before you were Mademoiselle de la Vallière's lover or since you have become so."

The king, irritated beyond measure, especially because he felt that he was mastered, endeavored to dismiss Athos by a gesture.

"Sire," replied the count, "I will tell you all; I will not leave your presence until I have been satisfied either

by your Majesty or by myself, — satisfied if you prove to me that you are right, satisfied if I prove to you that you are wrong. Oh, you will listen to me, Sire! I am old now, and I am attached to everything that is really great and true in your kingdom. I am a gentleman who shed my blood for your father and for yourself, without ever having asked a single favor either from yourself or from your father. I have never inflicted the slightest wrong or injury on any one in this world, and have put kings under obligations to me. You will listen to me. I have come to ask you for an account of the honor of one of your servants whom you have deceived by a falsehood or betrayed through weakness. I know that these words irritate your Majesty; but on the other hand, the facts are killing us. I know you are inquiring what penalty you will inflict for my frankness; but I know what punishment I will implore God to inflict upon you when I set before him your perjury and my son's unhappiness."

The king during these remarks was walking hurriedly to and fro, his hand thrust into the breast of his coat, his head haughtily raised, his eyes blazing with wrath. "Monsieur," he cried suddenly, "if I acted towards you as the king, you would be already punished; but I am only a man, and I have the right to love in this world every one who loves me, — a happiness which is so rarely found."

"You cannot pretend to such a right as a man any more than as a king, Sire; or if you intended to exercise that right in a loyal manner, you should have told M. de Bragelonne so, and not have exiled him."

"I think I am condescending to dispute with you, Monsieur!" interrupted Louis XIV., with that majesty of air and manner which he alone was able to give to his look and his voice.

"I was hoping that you would reply to me," said the count.

"You shall know my reply, Monsieur, very soon."

"You already know my thoughts on the subject," was the Comte de la Fère's answer.

"You have forgotten you are speaking to the king, Monsieur. It is a crime."

"You have forgotten you are destroying the lives of two men, Sire. It is a mortal sin."

"Go! — at once!"

"Not until I have said to you: Son of Louis XIII., you begin your reign badly, for you begin it by abduction and disloyalty! My race — myself, too — are now freed from all that affection and respect towards you to which I bound my son by oath in the vaults of St. Denis, in the presence of the relics of your noble forefathers. You are now become our enemy, Sire; and henceforth we have nothing to do save with Heaven alone, our sole master. Be warned!"

"Do you threaten?"

"Oh, no!" said Athos, sadly; "I have as little bravado as fear in my soul. The God of whom I spoke to you is now listening to me. He knows that for the safety and honor of your crown I would even yet shed every drop of blood which twenty years of civil and foreign warfare have left in my veins. I can well say, then, that I threaten the king as little as I threaten the man; but I tell you, Sire, you lose two servants, — for you have destroyed faith in the heart of the father, and love in the heart of the son: the one ceases to believe in the royal word, the other no longer believes in the loyalty of man or the purity of woman; the one is dead to every feeling of respect, the other to obedience. Adieu!"

Thus saying, Athos broke his sword across his knee,

slowly placed the two pieces upon the floor, and saluting the king, who was almost choking from rage and shame, quitted the cabinet.

Louis, who sat near the table, completely overwhelmed, spent several minutes in recovering himself, then suddenly rose and rang the bell violently. "Tell M. d'Artagnan to come here," he said to the terrified ushers.

CHAPTER LXVI.

AFTER THE STORM.

Our readers will doubtless have been asking themselves how it happened that Athos, of whom not a word has been said for some time past, arrived so very opportunely at court. Our claim, as narrator, being that we unfold events in exact logical sequence, we hold ourselves ready to answer that question.

Porthos, faithful to his duty as an arranger of affairs, had immediately after leaving the Palais-Royal set off to join Raoul at the Minimes in the Bois de Vincennes, and had related everything, even to the smallest details, which had passed between De Saint-Aignan and himself. He finished by saying that the message which the king had sent to his favorite would not probably occasion more than a short delay, and that De Saint-Aignan, as soon as he could leave the king, would not lose a moment in accepting the invitation which Raoul had sent him.

But Raoul, less credulous than his old friend, had concluded, from Porthos's recital, that if De Saint-Aignan was going to the king, De Saint-Aignan would tell the king everything, and that the king would therefore forbid De Saint-Aignan to obey the summons he had received to the hostile meeting. The consequence of his reflections was that he had left Porthos to remain at the place appointed for the meeting, in the very improbable case that De Saint-Aignan would come there; and had urged Porthos not to remain there more than an hour or an hour and a half. Porthos, however, formally refused to

assent to that, but on the contrary installed himself in the Minimes as if he were going to take root there, making Raoul promise that when he had been to see his father, he would return to his own apartments, in order that Porthos's servant might know where to find him in case M. de Saint-Aignan should happen to come to the rendezvous.

Bragelonne had left Vincennes, and had proceeded at once straight to the apartments of Athos, who had been in Paris during the last two days, and had been already informed of what had taken place by a letter from D'Artagnan. Raoul arrived at his father's.

Athos, after having held out his hand to him, and embraced him most affectionately, made a sign for him to sit down. "I know you come to me as a man would go to a friend, Viscount, whenever he is suffering; tell me, therefore, what it is that brings you now."

The young man bowed, and began his recital; more than once in the course of it his tears choked his utterance, and a sob checked in his throat compelled him to pause in his narration. However, he finished at last. Athos most probably already knew how matters stood, as we have just now said that D'Artagnan had already written to him; but preserving until the conclusion that calm, unruffled composure of manner which constituted the almost superhuman side of his character, he replied: "Raoul, I do not believe there is a word of truth in the rumors; I do not believe in the existence of what you fear, although I do not deny that persons most entitled to the fullest credit have already conversed with me on the subject. In my heart and soul I think it impossible that the king could be guilty of such an outrage upon a gentleman. I will answer for the king, therefore, and will soon bring you back the proof of what I say."

Raoul, wavering like a drunken man between what he

had seen with his own eyes and the imperturbable faith he had in a man who had never told a falsehood, bowed, and simply answered, "Go, then, Monsieur the Count; I will await your return;" and he sat down, burying his face in his hands.

Athos dressed, and then left him in order to wait upon the king; what occurred in the interview with the king is already known to our readers.

When he returned to his lodgings, Raoul, pale and dejected, had not quitted his attitude of despair. At the sound, however, of the opening doors and of his father's footsteps, as he approached him, the young man raised his head. Athos's face was very pale, his head uncovered, and his manner full of seriousness; he gave his cloak and hat to the lackey, dismissed him with a gesture, and sat down near Raoul.

"Well, Monsieur," inquired the young man, "are you quite convinced now?"

"I am, Raoul; the king loves Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"He confesses it, then?" cried Raoul.

"Yes," replied Athos.

"And she?"

"I have not seen her."

"No; but the king spoke to you about her. What did he say?"

"He says that she loves him."

"Oh, you see, — you see, Monsieur!" said the young man, with a gesture of despair.

"Raoul," resumed the count, "I told the king, believe me, all that you yourself could possibly have said; and I believe I did so in becoming language, though sufficiently firm."

"And what did you say to him, Monsieur?"

"I told him, Raoul, that everything was now at an end between him and ourselves; that you would never serve him again. I told him that I, too, should remain aloof. Nothing further remains for me, then, but to be satisfied of one thing."

"What is that, Monsieur?"

"Whether you have determined to adopt any steps."

"Any steps? Regarding what?"

"With reference to your disappointed affection and —"

"Finish, Monsieur!"

"And with reference to revenge; for I fear that you think of avenging your wrongs."

"Oh, Monsieur, with regard to my affection, I shall perhaps, some day or other, succeed in tearing it from my heart; I trust I shall do so, aided by Heaven's merciful help and your wise exhortations. So far as vengeance is concerned, it occurred to me only when under the influence of an evil thought, for I could not revenge myself upon the one who is actually guilty; I have therefore already renounced every idea of revenge."

"And so you no longer think of seeking a quarrel with M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"No, Monsieur. I sent him a challenge. If he accepts it, I will maintain it; if he does not take it up, I will leave it where it is."

"And La Vallière?"

"You cannot, I know, have seriously thought that I should dream of revenging myself upon a woman?" replied Raoul, with a smile so sad that a tear started even to the eyes of his father, who had so many times in the course of his life been bowed beneath his own sorrows and those of others.

Athos held out his hand to Raoul, which the latter seized most eagerly.

"And so, Monsieur the Count, you are quite satisfied that the misfortune is without a remedy?" inquired the young man.

Athos shook his head. "Poor boy!" he murmured.

"You think that I still hope," said Raoul, "and you pity me. Oh, it is indeed a horrible suffering for me to despise, as I ought to do, her whom I have loved so devotedly. If I but had some real cause of complaint against her, I should be happy, and should be able to forgive her."

Athos looked at his son with a sorrowful air. The few words which Raoul had just pronounced seemed to have issued out of his own heart. At this moment the servant announced M. d'Artagnan. This name sounded very differently to the ears of Athos and of Raoul.

The musketeer entered the room with a vague smile upon his lips. Raoul paused. Athos walked towards his friend with an expression of face which did not escape Bragelonne. D'Artagnan answered Athos's look by a simple movement of the eyelid; and then, advancing towards Raoul, whom he took by the hand, he said, addressing both father and son, "Well, you are trying to console the boy, it seems."

"And you, kind and good as usual, are come to help me in my difficult task."

As he said this, Athos pressed D'Artagnan's hand between both his own. Raoul fancied he observed in this pressure something beyond the sense his mere words conveyed.

"Yes," replied the musketeer, smoothing his mustache with the hand that Athos had left free, — "yes, I have come also."

"You are most welcome, Chevalier; not for the consolation you bring with you, but on your own account. I am already consoled," said Raoul; and he attempted to

smile, but the effect was far more sad than any tears D'Artagnan had ever seen shed.

"That is all well and good, then," said D'Artagnan.

"Only," continued Raoul, "you have arrived just as the count was about to give me the details of his interview with the king. You will allow the count to continue?" added the young man, as with his eyes fixed on the musketeer he seemed to search the depths of his heart.

"His interview with the king?" said D'Artagnan, in a tone so natural and unassumed that there was no reason to doubt his astonishment. "You have seen the king then, Athos?"

Athos smiled as he said, "Yes, I have seen him."

"Ah, indeed! you were ignorant, then, that the count had seen his Majesty?" inquired Raoul, half reassured.

"My faith, yes! entirely."

"In that case I am less uneasy," said Raoul.

"Uneasy — and about what?" inquired Athos.

"Forgive me, Monsieur," said Raoul; "but knowing so well the regard and affection you have for me, I was afraid you might possibly have expressed somewhat plainly to his Majesty my own sufferings and your indignation, and that the king had consequently —"

"And that the king had consequently —" repeated D'Artagnan; "well, go on, finish what you were going to say."

"I have now to ask you to forgive me, M. d'Artagnan," said Raoul. "For a moment, and I cannot help confessing it, I trembled lest you had come here, not as M. d'Artagnan, but as captain of the Musketeers."

"You are mad, my poor boy," cried D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter in which an exact observer might perhaps have desired a little more frankness.

"So much the better," said Raoul.

"Yes, mad; and do you know what I would advise you to do?"

"Tell me, Monsieur; for the advice is sure to be good, as it comes from you."

"Very well, then. I advise you, after your long journey from England, after your visit to M. de Guiche, after your visit to Madame, after your visit to Porthos, after your journey to Vincennes, — I advise you, I say, to take a few hours' rest; go and lie down, sleep for a dozen hours, and when you wake up, go and ride one of my horses until you have tired him to death." And drawing Raoul towards him, D'Artagnan embraced him as if he were his own child. Athos did the like; only, it was very apparent that the father's kiss was more tender and his embrace closer than those of the friend.

The young man again looked at his companions, endeavoring with the utmost strength of his intelligence to read what was in their minds; but his look was powerless upon the smiling countenance of the musketeer or upon the calm and composed features of the Comte de la Fère.

"Where are you going, Raoul?" inquired the latter, seeing that Bragelonne was preparing to go out.

"To my own apartments," replied Raoul, in his soft and sad voice.

"We shall be sure to find you there, then, if we should have anything to say to you?"

"Yes, Monsieur; but do you suppose it likely you will have something to say to me?"

"How can I tell?" said Athos.

"Yes, new consolations," said D'Artagnan, pushing him gently towards the door.

Raoul, observing the perfect composure which marked every gesture of his two friends, quitted the count's room, carrying away with him nothing but the individual feeling

of his own particular distress. "Thank Heaven!" he said; "since that is the case, I need only think of myself." And wrapping himself in his cloak, in order to conceal from the passers-by in the streets his gloomy face, he started out to return to his own rooms, as he had promised Porthos.

The two friends watched the young man as he walked away with a feeling akin to pity; only, each expressed it in a very different way.

"Poor Raoul!" said Athos, sighing deeply.

"Poor Raoul!" said D'Artagnan, shrugging his shoulders.

CHAPTER LXVII.

HEU ! MISER !

"Poor Raoul!" Athos had said; "Poor Raoul!" D'Artagnan had said: to be pitied by both these men, Raoul must indeed have been most unhappy. And when he found himself alone, face to face as it were with his own troubles, leaving behind him the intrepid friend and the indulgent father; when he recalled the avowal of the king's affection, which had robbed him of Louise de la Vallière, whom he loved so deeply, — he felt his heart almost breaking; as indeed we all have at least once in our lives, at the first illusion destroyed, at the first love betrayed. "Oh," he murmured, "all is over then! Nothing is now left me in this world, — nothing to look for, nothing to hope for! Guiche has told me so; my father has told me so, and M. d'Artagnan likewise. Everything is a mere idle dream in this life. That future which I have been hopelessly pursuing for the last ten years, a dream! that union of our hearts, a dream! that life formed of love and happiness, a dream! Poor fool, to publish my dreams in the face of my friends and my enemies, — that my friends may be saddened by my troubles and my enemies may laugh at my sorrows! So my unhappiness will soon become a notorious disgrace, a public scandal; so to-morrow I shall be ignominiously pointed at."

Despite the composure which he had promised his father and D'Artagnan to observe, Raoul could not resist uttering a few words of dark menace. "And yet," he

continued, "if my name were De Wardes, and if I had the pliant character and strength of will of M. d'Artagnan, I should laugh, with my lips at least; I should convince other women that this perfidious girl, honored by my love, leaves me only one regret, — that of having been deceived by her counterfeit of honesty. Some men might perhaps make favor with the king at my expense: I should put myself on the track of those jesters; I should chastise a few of them, — the men would fear me, and by the time I had laid three at my feet I should be adored by the women. Yes, yes; that indeed would be the proper course to adopt, and the Comte de la Fère himself would not object to it. Has not he also been tried, in his earlier days, in the same manner as I have just been tried myself? Did he not replace love by intoxication? He has often told me so. Why should not I replace love by pleasure? He must have suffered as much as I suffer, — even more so, perhaps. The history of one man is the history of all men, — a lengthened trial, of greater or less duration, more or less bitter or sorrowful. The voice of human nature is nothing but one prolonged cry. But what are the sufferings of others compared to those from which I am now suffering? Does the open wound in another's breast soften the pain of the gaping wound in our own? Or does the blood which is welling from another man's side stanch that which is pouring from our own? Does the general anguish of our fellow-creatures lessen our own private and particular anguish? No, no; each suffers on his own account, each struggles with his own grief, each sheds his own tears. And besides, what has my life been up to the present moment? A cold, barren, sterile arena, in which I have always fought for others, never for myself, — sometimes for a king, sometimes for a woman. The king has betrayed me; the woman disdained me. Miserable, un-

happy wretch that I am ! Women ! Can I not make all expiate the crime of one of their sex ? What does that require ? To have a heart no longer, or to forget that I ever had one ; to be strong, even against weakness itself ; to lean always, even when one feels that the support is giving way. What is needed to attain that result ? To be young, handsome, strong, valiant, rich. I am, or shall be, all that. But, honor ? What is honor, after all ? A theory which every man understands in his own way. My father tells me : ' Honor is the consideration of what is due to others, and particularly of what one owes to one's self.' But De Guiche and Manicamp, and De Saint-Aignan particularly, would say to me, ' Honor consists in serving the passions and pleasures of one's king.' Honor such as that, indeed, is easy and productive enough. With honor like that I can keep my post at the court, become a gentleman of the chamber, and have the command of a regiment. With honor such as that, I can be both duke and peer.

" The stain which that woman has just stamped upon me, the grief with which she has just broken my heart, — mine, Raoul's, her friend from childhood, — in no way affect M. de Bragelonne, an excellent officer, a courageous leader, who will cover himself with glory at the first encounter, and who will become a hundred times greater than Mademoiselle de la Vallière is to-day, the mistress of the king ; for the king will not marry her, — and the more publicly he proclaims her as his mistress, the more will he enlarge the band of shame which he places as a crown upon her brow ; and when others shall despise her as I despise her, I shall have become famous. Alas ! we had walked together side by side, she and I, during the earliest, the brightest, and best portion of our existence, hand in hand along the charming path of life, covered with the flowers

of youth; and now we come to a cross road, where she separates herself from me, whence we shall follow different roads, which will lead us always farther apart. And to attain the end of this path, oh, Heaven! I am alone, I am in despair, I am crushed. Oh, unhappy man that I am!"

Such were the sinister reflections in which Raoul was indulging when his foot mechanically paused at the door of his own dwelling. He had reached it without noticing the streets through which he had passed, without knowing how he had come; he pushed open the door, continued to advance, and ascended the staircase. The staircase, as in most of the houses at that period, was very dark, and the landings were obscure. Raoul lived on the first floor; he paused in order to ring. Olivain appeared, and took Raoul's sword and cloak from his hands. Raoul himself opened the door which from the antechamber led into a small salon, richly furnished enough for the salon of a young man, and completely filled with flowers by Olivain, who knowing his master's tastes had shown himself studiously attentive in gratifying them without caring whether his master perceived his attention or not. There was a portrait of La Vallière in the salon, which had been drawn by herself and given by her to Raoul. This portrait, fastened above a large easy-chair covered with dark-colored damask, was the first point towards which Raoul bent his steps, the first object on which he fixed his eyes. It was, moreover, Raoul's usual habit to do so; every time he entered his room, this portrait, before anything else, attracted his attention. This time, as usual, he walked straight up to the portrait, placed his knees upon the arm-chair, and paused to look at it sadly. His arms were crossed upon his breast, his head slightly thrown back, his eyes filled with tears, his lips curved in a bitter smile.

He looked at the portrait of her whom he so tenderly loved ; and then all that he had said passed before his mind again, and all that he had suffered assailed his heart. After a long silence he murmured for the third time, " Miserable, unhappy wretch that I am ! "

He had hardly pronounced these words, when he heard the sound of a sigh and a groan behind him. He turned sharply round, and perceived in the angle of the salon, standing up, a bending veiled female figure, which the opening door had concealed as he entered, and which, since he had not turned around, he had not perceived. He advanced towards this figure, whose presence in his room had not been announced to him ; and as he bowed, and inquired at the same moment who she was, she suddenly raised her head, and removed the veil from her face, revealing her pale and sorrow-stricken features.

Raoul staggered back, as if he had seen a ghost. " Louise ! " he cried, in a tone of such despair as one could hardly believe the human voice could express without breaking all the fibres of the heart.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

WOUNDS UPON WOUNDS.

Mademoiselle de la Vallière (for it was indeed she) advanced a few steps towards him. "Yes — Louise," she murmured.

But this interval, short as it had been, was quite sufficient for Raoul to recover himself. "You, Mademoiselle?" he said; and then added, in an indefinable tone, "You here!"

"Yes, Raoul," the young girl replied; "I have been waiting for you."

"I beg your pardon. When I came into the room I was not aware — "

"I know — but I entreated Olivain not to tell you — "

Louise hesitated; and as Raoul did not attempt to interrupt her, a moment's silence ensued, during which the sound of their throbbing hearts might have been heard, no longer in unison with each other, but the one beating as violently as the other. It was for Louise to speak, and she made an effort to do so. "I wished to speak to you," she said. "It was absolutely necessary that I should see you — myself — alone. I have not hesitated to adopt a step which must remain secret; for no one, except yourself, could understand my motive, M. de Bragelonne."

"In fact, Mademoiselle," Raoul stammered out, almost breathless from emotion, "so far as I am concerned, and despite the good opinion you have of me, I confess — "

"Will you do me the great kindness to sit down and listen to me?" said Louise, interrupting him with her soft, sweet voice.

Bragelonne looked at her for a moment; then, mournfully shaking his head, he sat, or rather fell down, on a chair. "Speak!" he said.

Louise cast a glance all round her. This look was a timid entreaty, and implored secrecy far more effectually than her expressed words had done a few minutes before.

Raoul rose, and went to the door, which he opened. "Olivain," he said, "I am not within for any one;" and then, turning towards Louise, he added, "Is not that what you wished?"

Nothing could have produced a greater effect upon Louise than these few words which seemed to signify, "You see that I still understand you." She passed a handkerchief across her eyes, in order to remove a rebellious tear; and then, having collected herself for a moment, she said: "Raoul, do not turn your kind, frank look away from me! You are not one of those men who despise a woman for having given her heart to another, even though that love might render him unhappy or might wound his pride."

Raoul did not reply.

"Alas!" continued La Vallière, "it is only too true. My cause is a bad one, and I know not in what way to begin. It will be better for me, I think, to relate to you very simply everything that has befallen me. As I shall speak the truth, I shall always find my path clear before me in the obscurity, hesitation, and obstacles which I have to brave in order to solace my heart, which is full to overflowing, and wishes to pour itself out at your feet."

Raoul continued to preserve the same unbroken silence.

La Vallière looked at him with an air that seemed to say, "Encourage me; for pity's sake, but a single word!" But Raoul did not open his lips; and the young girl was obliged to continue.

"Just now," she said, "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me by the king's directions." She cast down her eyes as she said this; while Raoul, on his side, turned his away, in order to avoid looking at her. "M. de Saint-Aignan came to me from the king," she repeated, "and told me that you knew all;" and she attempted to look Raoul in the face, after inflicting this further wound upon him in addition to the many others he had already received; but it was impossible to meet Raoul's eyes.

"He told me you were incensed with me, — justly so, I admit."

This time Raoul looked at the young girl, and a smile full of disdain passed across his lips.

"Oh," she continued, "I entreat you, do not say that you have had any other feeling against me than that of anger merely! Raoul, wait until I have told you all, — wait until I have said to you all that I had to say, all that I came to say!"

Raoul, by the strength of his own iron will, forced his features to assume a calmer expression; and the disdainful smile upon his lip passed away.

"In the first place," said La Vallière, — "in the first place, with my hands raised in entreaty towards you, with my forehead bowed to the ground before you, I entreat you, as the most generous, as the noblest of men, to pardon, to forgive me. If I have left you in ignorance of what was passing in my own bosom, never, at least, would I have consented to deceive you. Oh, I entreat you, Raoul, — I implore you on my knees, — answer me one word, even though you wrong me in doing so! Better

an injurious word from your lips than a suspicion in your heart!"

"I admire your subtlety of expression, Mademoiselle," said Raoul, making an effort to remain calm. "To leave another in ignorance that you are deceiving him is loyal; but to deceive him — it seems that that would be very wrong, and that you would not do it."

"Monsieur, for a long time I thought that I loved you better than anything else; and so long as I believed in my love for you, I told you that I loved you. At Blois I loved you. The king visited Blois; I believed I loved you still. I could have sworn it on the altar; but a day came when I was undeceived."

"Well, on that day, Mademoiselle, knowing that I still continued to love you, true loyalty of conduct ought to have obliged you to tell me you had ceased to love me."

"But on that day, Raoul, — on that day, when I read in the depths of my own heart, when I confessed to myself that you no longer filled my mind entirely, when I saw another future before me than that of being your friend, your life-long companion, your wife, — on that day, Raoul, you were not, alas! any more beside me."

"But you knew where I was, Mademoiselle; you could have written to me."

"Raoul, I did not dare to do so. Raoul, I have been weak and cowardly. I knew you so thoroughly — I knew how devotedly you loved me — that I trembled at the bare idea of the grief I was going to cause you; and that is so true, Raoul, that at this very moment I am now speaking to you, bending thus before you, my heart crushed in my bosom, my voice full of sighs, my eyes full of tears, — it is so perfectly true, that I have no other defence than my frankness, I have no other sorrow greater than that which I read in your eyes."

Raoul attempted to smile.

"No," said the young girl, with a profound conviction, "no, no; you will not do me so foul a wrong as to disguise your feelings before me now! You loved me, you were sure of your affection for me, you did not deceive yourself, you did not lie to your own heart; while I — I —" And pale as death, her arms thrown despairingly above her head, she fell upon her knees.

"While you," said Raoul, — "you told me you loved me, and yet you loved another."

"Alas, yes!" cried the poor girl, — "alas, yes! I do love another; and that other — oh, for Heaven's sake, let me say it, Raoul, for it is my only excuse — that other I love better than my own life, better than my own soul even. Forgive my fault or punish my treason, Raoul. I came here in no way to defend myself, but merely to say to you, 'You know what it is to love!' Well, I love! I love to that degree that I would give my life, my very soul, to the man I love. If he should ever cease to love me, I shall die of grief and despair, unless God helps me, unless the Lord shows pity upon me. Raoul, I came here to submit myself to your will, whatever it might be, — to die, if it were your wish I should die. Kill me, then, Raoul, if in your heart you believe I deserve death!"

"Take care, Mademoiselle!" said Raoul; "the woman who invites death is one who has nothing but her heart's blood to offer to her deceived and betrayed lover."

"You are right," she said.

Raoul uttered a deep sigh as he exclaimed, "And you love without being able to forget!"

"I love without a wish to forget, without a wish ever to love any one else," replied La Vallière.

"Very well," said Raoul. "You have said to me, in fact, all you had to say, all I could possibly wish to know.

And now, Mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness; for it is I who have almost been an obstacle in your life. I, too, have been wrong; for in deceiving myself I helped to deceive you."

"Oh," said La Vallière, "I do not ask you so much as that, Raoul!"

"I only am to blame, Mademoiselle," continued Raoul. "Better informed than yourself of the difficulties of this life, I should have enlightened you. I ought not to have relied upon uncertainty; I ought to have extracted an answer from your heart, while I hardly even sought an acknowledgment from your lips. Once more, Mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness."

"Impossible, impossible!" she cried; "you are mocking me."

"How, impossible?"

"Yes, it is impossible to be good and excellent and perfect to such a degree as that."

"Take care!" said Raoul, with a bitter smile; "for presently you may say perhaps that I did not love you."

"Oh, you love me like an affectionate brother; let me hope that, Raoul."

"As a brother! Undeceive yourself, Louise! I loved you as a lover, as a husband, with the deepest, the truest, the fondest affection."

"Raoul, Raoul!"

"As a brother! Oh, Louise! I loved you so much that I would have given all my blood for you, drop by drop; all my flesh, shred by shred; all my eternity, hour by hour."

"Raoul! Raoul! for pity's sake!"

"I loved you so much, Louise, that my heart is dead, my faith is extinguished, my eyes have lost their light. I

loved you so much that I see nothing more either on earth or in heaven."

"Raoul, dear Raoul! spare me, I implore you!" cried La Vallière. "Oh, if I had known —"

"It is too late, Louise. You love, you are happy; I read your happiness through your tears, — behind the tears which the loyalty of your nature makes you shed; I feel the sighs which your love breathes forth. Louise, Louise, you have made me the most abjectly wretched man living; leave me, I entreat you! Adieu! adieu!"

"Forgive me, I entreat you!"

"Have I not done more? Have I not told you that I love you still?" She buried her face in her hands. "And to tell you that, — do you understand me, Louise? — to tell you that at such a moment as this, to tell you that as I have told you, is to pronounce my own sentence of death. Adieu!"

La Vallière wished to hold out her hands to him.

"We ought not to see each other again in this world," he said; and as she was on the point of calling out in bitter agony at this remark, he placed his hand on her mouth to stifle the exclamation. She pressed her lips upon it and fell fainting.

"Olivain," said Raoul, "take this young lady and bear her to the carriage which is waiting for her at the door."

As Olivain lifted her up, Raoul made a movement towards La Vallière, as if to give her a first and last kiss; but stopping abruptly, he said, "No, she is not mine; I am not the King of France, to steal!" And he returned to his room; while the lackey carried La Vallière, still fainting, to the carriage.

CHAPTER LXIX.

WHAT RAOUL HAD GUESSED.

After Raoul's departure, and the two exclamations which had followed him, Athos and D'Artagnan found themselves alone, face to face. Athos immediately resumed the earnest manner which had possessed him when D'Artagnan arrived.

"Well," Athos said, "what have you come to announce to me, my friend?"

"I?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Yes; I do not see you in this way without some reason for it," said Athos, smiling.

"The deuce!" said D'Artagnan.

"I will place you at your ease. The king is furious, is he not?"

"Well, I must say he is not altogether pleased."

"And you have come —"

"By his direction; yes."

"To arrest me, then?"

"My dear friend, you have hit the very mark."

"Oh, I expected it! Come!"

"Oh! oh! The devil!" said D'Artagnan; "what a hurry you are in!"

"I am afraid of delaying you," said Athos, smiling.

"I have plenty of time. Are you not curious, besides, to know how things went on between the king and me?"

"If you will be good enough to tell me, I will listen with the greatest pleasure," said Athos, pointing out to

D'Artagnan a large chair, in which the latter stretched himself in an easy attitude.

"Well, I will do so willingly enough," continued D'Artagnan, "for the conversation is rather interesting. In the first place, the king sent for me."

"As soon as I had left?"

"You were just going down the last steps of the staircase, as the musketeers told me. I arrived. My dear Athos, the king was not red in the face merely, he was positively purple. I was not aware, of course, of what had passed; only I saw a sword broken in two lying on the floor. 'Captain d'Artagnan,' cried the king, as soon as he saw me. 'Sire,' I replied. 'I abandon M. de la Fère; he is an insolent man.' 'An insolent man!' I exclaimed, in such a tone that the king stopped suddenly short. 'Captain d'Artagnan,' resumed the king, with his teeth clinched, 'you will listen to me and obey me.' 'That is my duty, Sire.' 'I have wished to spare that gentleman, of whom I retain some kind recollections, the affront of having him arrested in my presence.' 'Ah! ah!' I said quietly. 'But you will take a carriage.' At this I made a slight movement. 'If you object to arrest him yourself,' continued the king, 'send me my captain of the Guards.' 'Sire,' I replied, 'there is no necessity for the captain of the Guards, since I am on duty.' 'I should not like to annoy you,' said the king, kindly, 'for you have always served me well, M. d'Artagnan.' 'You do not annoy me, Sire,' I replied; 'I am on duty, that is all.' 'But,' said the king, in astonishment, 'I believe the count is your friend?' 'If he were my father, Sire, it would not make me less on duty than I am.' The king looked at me; he saw how unmoved my face was, and seemed satisfied. 'You will arrest M. le Comte de la Fère, then?' he inquired. 'Most certainly, Sire, if you

give me the order to do so.' 'Very well; I order you to do so.' I bowed and replied, 'Where is the count, Sire?' 'You will look for him.' 'And I am to arrest him wherever he may be?' 'Yes; but at his own house if possible. If he has started for his own estate, leave Paris at once, and arrest him on his way thither.' I bowed; but as I did not move, he said, 'Well?' 'I am waiting, Sire.' 'What are you waiting for?' 'For the signed order.' The king seemed annoyed; for in point of fact it was the exercise of a fresh act of authority, — a repetition of the arbitrary act, if indeed it is to be considered as such. He took his pen slowly, and in no very good temper; then he wrote, 'Order for M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of my Musketeers, to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère, wherever he is to be found.' He then turned towards me; but I was looking on without moving a muscle of my face. In all probability he thought he perceived something like bravado in my tranquil manner, for he signed hurriedly; and then handing me the order, he said, 'Go!' I obeyed; and here I am."

Athos pressed his friend's hand. "Well, let us set off," he said.

"Oh! surely," said D'Artagnan, "you must have some trifling matters to arrange before you leave your apartments in this manner?"

"I? Not at all."

"Why not?"

"Why, you know, D'Artagnan, I have always been a very simple traveller on this earth, ready to go to the end of the world by the order of my sovereign, ready to quit it at the summons of my Maker. What does a man who is thus prepared require in such a case? — a portmanteau or a shroud. I am ready at this moment, as I have always been, dear friend, and can accompany you at once."

"But Bragelonne —"

"I have brought him up in the same principles I laid down for my own guidance; and you observed that as soon as he perceived you he guessed, that very moment, the motive of your visit. We have thrown him off his guard for a moment; but do not be uneasy, — he is sufficiently prepared for my disgrace not to be too much alarmed at it. So, let us go."

"Very well, let us go," said D'Artagnan, quietly.

"As I broke my sword in the king's presence, and threw the pieces at his feet, I presume that will dispense with the necessity of delivering it over to you."

"You are quite right; and besides that, what the devil do you suppose I could do with your sword?"

"Am I to walk behind or before you?" inquired Athos, laughing.

"You will walk arm-in-arm with me," replied D'Artagnan, as he took the count's arm to descend the staircase; and in this manner they arrived at the landing. Grimaud, whom they had met in the anteroom, looked at them, as they went out together in this manner, with some little uneasiness; his experience of affairs was quite sufficient to give him good reason to suspect that there was something wrong.

"Ah! is that you, Grimaud?" said Athos, kindly. "We are going —"

"To take a turn in my carriage," interrupted D'Artagnan, with a friendly nod of the head.

Grimaud thanked D'Artagnan by a grimace, which was evidently intended for a smile, and accompanied the two friends to the door. Athos entered first into the carriage; D'Artagnan followed him, without saying a word to the coachman. The departure had taken place so quietly that it excited no disturbance or attention even in the neigh-

borhood. When the carriage had reached the quays, "You are taking me to the Bastille, I perceive," said Athos.

"I?" said D'Artagnan. "I take you wherever you may choose to go; nowhere else, I can assure you."

"What do you mean?" said the count, surprised.

"*Pardieu!*" said D'Artagnan, "you quite understand that I undertook the mission with no other object in view than that of carrying it out exactly as you liked. You did not think that I would have you thrown into prison like that, brutally, without reflection. If I had anticipated that, I should have let the captain of the Guards undertake it."

"And so —" said Athos.

"And so, I repeat, we will go wherever you may choose."

"My dear friend," said Athos, embracing D'Artagnan, "how like you that is!"

"Well, it seems simple enough to me. The coachman will take you to the barrier of the Cours-la-Reine; you will find a horse there which I have ordered to be kept ready for you; with that horse you will be able to do three posts without stopping; and I, on my side, will take care not to return to the king, to tell him that you have gone away, until it will be impossible to overtake you. In the mean time you will have reached Havre, and from Havre you will go to England, where you will find the charming residence which my friend M. Monk gave me, — to say nothing of the hospitality which King Charles will not fail to show you. Well, what do you think of this project?"

"Take me to the Bastille," said Athos, smiling.

"You are an obstinate-headed fellow, dear Athos," returned D'Artagnan; "reflect for a few moments."

"Upon what?"

"That you are no longer twenty years of age. Believe me, — I speak according to my own knowledge and experience, — a prison is certain death for men of our time of life. No, no; I will never allow you to languish in prison. Why, the very thought of it turns my head."

"Dear D'Artagnan," Athos replied, "happily God made me as strong in body as in mind; and rely upon it, I shall retain my strength up to the very last moment."

"But this is not force; it is folly."

"No, D'Artagnan, it is the highest order of reasoning. Do not suppose that I should in the slightest degree in the world discuss the question with you, whether you would not be ruined in endeavoring to save me. I should have done precisely as you have arranged, if flight had seemed proper to me; I should therefore have accepted from you what without any doubt you would have accepted from me. No! I know you too well even to breathe a word upon the subject."

"Ah, if you would only let me do it," said D'Artagnan, "how I would send the king running after you!"

"He is the king, dear friend."

"Oh, that is all the same to me; and king though he be, I would plainly tell him, 'Sire! imprison, exile, kill every one in France and Europe; order me to arrest, and even poniard whom you like, — even were it Monsieur, your own brother; but do not touch one of the four musketeers, or, if so, *mordioux!*'"

"My dear friend," replied Athos, quietly, "I should like to persuade you of one thing; namely, that I wish to be arrested, — that I desire above all things that my arrest should take place." D'Artagnan made a movement of his shoulders. "What does that mean? It is so. If you were to let me escape, it would be only to return of my

own accord, and constitute myself a prisoner. I wish to prove to this young man, who is dazzled by the power and splendor of his crown, that he can be regarded as the first among men only by proving himself to be the most generous and the wisest among them. He may punish, imprison, or torture me, — it matters not. He abuses his opportunities, and I wish him to learn the bitterness of remorse, while Heaven teaches him what a chastisement is."

"Well, well," replied D'Artagnan, "I know only too well that when you have once said 'No,' you mean 'No.' I do not insist any longer. You wish to go to the Bastille?"

"I do wish to go there."

"Let us go, then! To the Bastille!" cried D'Artagnan to the coachman; and throwing himself back in the carriage, he gnawed the ends of his mustache with a fury which to Athos, who knew him well, signified a resolution either already taken or in course of formation. A profound silence ensued in the carriage, which continued to roll on, but neither faster nor slower than before.

Athos took the musketeer by the hand. "You are not angry with me, D'Artagnan?" he said.

"I? Oh, no! certainly not, of course not! What you do from heroism, I should have done from sheer obstinacy."

"But you are quite of opinion, are you not, that Heaven will avenge me, D'Artagnan?"

"And I know some persons on earth who will lend a helping hand," said the captain.

CHAPTER LXX.

THREE GUESTS ASTONISHED TO FIND THEMSELVES AT SUPPER TOGETHER.

The carriage arrived at the outside gate of the Bastille. A soldier on guard stopped it; but D'Artagnan had only to utter a single word to procure admittance, and the carriage passed on. While they were proceeding along the covered way which led to the courtyard of the governor's residence, D'Artagnan, whose lynx eye saw everything, even through the walls, suddenly cried out, "What is that out yonder?"

"Well," said Athos, quietly, "what is it?"

"Look yonder, Athos!"

"In the courtyard?"

"Yes, yes; make haste!"

"Well, a carriage; very likely conveying a prisoner like myself."

"That would be too droll."

"I do not understand you."

"Make haste and look again, and look at the man who is just getting out of that carriage."

At that very moment a second sentinel stopped D'Artagnan; and while the formalities were gone through, Athos could see at a hundred paces from him the man whom his friend had pointed out to him. He was, in fact, getting out of the carriage at the door of the governor's house. "Well," inquired D'Artagnan, "do you see him?"

"Yes; he is a man in a gray suit."

"What do you say of him?"

"I cannot very well tell. He is, as I have just now told you, a man in a gray suit, who is getting out of a carriage; that is all."

"Athos, I will wager anything it is he."

"He? — who?"

"Aramis."

"Aramis arrested? Impossible!"

"I do not say he is arrested, since we see him alone in his carriage."

"Well, then, what is he doing here?"

"Oh, he knows Baisemeaux, the governor!" replied the musketeer, slyly. "My faith! we have arrived just in time."

"What for?"

"In order to see what we can see."

"I regret this meeting exceedingly. When Aramis sees me, he will be very much annoyed, — in the first place at seeing me, and in the next at being seen."

"Very well reasoned."

"Unfortunately, there is no remedy for it. Whenever any one meets another in the Bastille, even if he wished to draw back to avoid him, it would be impossible."

"Athos, I have an idea: the question is, to spare Aramis the annoyance you were speaking of, is it not?"

"What is to be done?"

"I will tell you; or, in order better to explain myself, let me relate the affair in my own manner. I will not recommend you to tell a falsehood, for that would be impossible for you to do."

"Well, what is it?"

"Well, I will lie for both of us; it is so easy to do that, with the nature and habits of a Gascon."

Athos smiled. The carriage stopped where the one we have just now pointed out had stopped; namely, at the door of the governor's house.

"It is understood, then?" said D'Artagnan, in a low voice to his friend.

Athos consented by a gesture.

They ascended the staircase. There will be no occasion for surprise at the facility with which they had entered into the Bastille, if it be remembered that before passing the first gate — in fact, the most difficult of all — D'Artagnan had announced that he had brought a prisoner of State. At the third gate, on the contrary, — that is to say, when he had once fairly entered the prison, — he merely said to the sentinel, "To M. Baisemeaux;" and they both passed on. In a few minutes they were in the governor's dining-room; and the first face which attracted D'Artagnan's observation was that of Aramis, who was seated side by side with Baisemeaux, and awaited the announcement of a good meal, whose odor impregnated the whole apartment. If D'Artagnan pretended surprise, Aramis did not pretend at all; he started when he saw his two friends, and his emotion was very apparent. Athos and D'Artagnan, however, made their salutations; and Baisemeaux, amazed, completely stupefied by the presence of those three guests, began to perform a few evolutions around them.

"Ah, there!" said Aramis, "by what chance —"

"We were just going to ask you," retorted D'Artagnan.

"Are we going to give ourselves up as prisoners?" cried Aramis, with an affectation of hilarity.

"Ah! ah!" said D'Artagnan; "it is true the walls smell deucedly like a prison. M. de Baisemeaux, you know you invited me to sup with you the other day."

"I?" cried Baisemeaux.

"Ah! one would say you had fallen from the clouds. You have no recollection of it?"

Baisemeaux turned pale and then red; looked at Aramis, who looked at him; and finally stammered, "Certainly — I am delighted — but — upon my honor — I have not the slightest — Ah! I have such a wretched memory."

"Well, I am wrong, I see," said D'Artagnan, as if he were offended.

"Wrong, how?"

"Wrong to remember, it seems."

Baisemeaux hurried towards him. "Do not stand on ceremony, my dear captain," he said. "I have the poorest head in the kingdom. Take me from my pigeons and their pigeon-house, and I am no better than the rawest recruit."

"At all events, you remember it now," said D'Artagnan, boldly.

"Yes, yes," replied the governor, hesitating; "I think I remember."

"It was when you came to the palace to see me; you told me some story or other about your accounts with M. de Louvière and M. de Tremblay."

"Oh, yes! perfectly."

"And about M. d'Herblay's kindness to you."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, looking the unhappy governor full in the face; "and yet you just now said you had no memory, M. de Baisemeaux."

Baisemeaux interrupted the musketeer in the midst of his revelations. "Yes, yes, you 're quite right; it seems to me that I am still there. I beg a thousand pardons. But now, once for all, my dear M. d'Artagnan, be sure that at this present time, as at any other, whether invited or not, you are master here, — you and M. d'Herblay,

your friend," he said, turning towards Aramis; "and this gentleman too," he added, bowing to Athos.

"Well, I thought it would be sure to turn out so," replied D'Artagnan. "This is the occasion of my coming: Having nothing to do this evening at the Palais-Royal, I wished to judge for myself what your ordinary style of living was like; and as I was coming along I met Monsieur the Count." Athos bowed. "The count, who had just left his Majesty, handed me an order which required immediate attention. We were close by here; I wished to call in, even if it were for no other object than that of shaking hands with you and of presenting the count to you, of whom you spoke so highly in the king's presence that very evening when —"

"Certainly, certainly — M. le Comte de la Fère, is it not?"

"Precisely."

"Monsieur the Count is welcome."

"And he will sup with you two, I suppose; while I, unfortunate dog that I am, must run off on a matter of duty. Oh, what happy beings you are, compared to myself!" D'Artagnan added, sighing as loud as Porthos might have done.

"And so you are going away?" said Aramis and Baisemeaux together, with the same expression of delighted surprise, the tone of which was immediately noticed by D'Artagnan.

"I leave you in my place," he said, "a noble and excellent guest;" and he touched Athos gently on the shoulder, who, astonished also, could not help exhibiting his surprise a little, — which was noticed by Aramis only, for M. de Baisemeaux was not quite equal to the three friends in point of intelligence.

"What! are you going to leave us?" resumed the governor.

"I shall be away only about an hour or an hour and a half. I will return in time for dessert."

"Oh, we will wait for you!" said Baisemeaux.

"No, no; that would be really disobliging me."

"You will be sure to return, though?" said Athos, with an expression of doubt.

"Most certainly," he said, pressing his friend's hand confidentially; and he added in a low voice, "Wait for me, Athos; be cheerful and lively as possible, and above all, don't allude to business affairs, for Heaven's sake!" and a renewed pressure of the hand impressed upon the count the necessity of being discreet and impenetrable.

Baisemeaux led D'Artagnan to the gate. Aramis, with many friendly protestations of delight, sat down by Athos, determined to make him speak; but Athos possessed all the virtues in their highest excellence. If necessity had required it, he would have been the finest orator in the world; but when there was need of silence he would die rather than utter a syllable.

Ten minutes after D'Artagnan's departure, the three gentlemen sat down to table, which was covered with the most substantial display of gastronomic luxury. Large joints, exquisite dishes, preserves, the greatest variety of wines, appeared successively upon the table, which was served at the king's expense, and of which expense M. Colbert would have no difficulty in saving two thirds, without any one in the Bastille being the worse for it.

Baisemeaux was the only one who ate and drank resolutely. Aramis allowed nothing to pass by him, but merely touched everything he took; Athos, after the soup and three *hors d'œuvres*, ate nothing more. The style of

conversation was such as it necessarily would be between three men so opposite in temper and ideas.

Aramis was incessantly asking himself by what extraordinary chance Athos was at Baisemeaux's when D'Artagnan was no longer there, and why D'Artagnan did not remain when Athos was there. Athos sounded all the depths of the mind of Aramis, who lived in the midst of subterfuge, evasion, and intrigue; he studied his man well and thoroughly, and felt convinced that he was engaged upon some important project. And then he too began to think of his own personal affair, and to lose himself in conjectures as to D'Artagnan's reason for having left the Bastille so abruptly, and for leaving behind him a prisoner so badly introduced and so badly looked after by the prison authorities.

But we shall not pause to examine into the thoughts and feelings of these personages; we will leave them to themselves, surrounded by the remains of poultry, game, and fish, mutilated by the generous knife of Baisemeaux. We are going to follow D'Artagnan instead, who, getting into the carriage which had brought him, cried out to the coachman, "To the king! and burn the pavement!"

CHAPTER LXXI.

WHAT TOOK PLACE AT THE LOUVRE DURING THE SUPPER AT THE BASTILLE.

M. DE SAINT-AIGNAN had executed the commission with which the king had intrusted him for La Vallière, as we have already seen in one of the preceding chapters; but whatever his eloquence might have been, he did not succeed in persuading the young girl that she had in the king a protector powerful enough for her under any combination of circumstances, and that she had no need of any one else in the world when the king was on her side. In point of fact, at the very first word which the favorite mentioned of the discovery of the famous secret, Louise, in a passion of tears, abandoned herself in utter despair to a sorrow which would have been far from flattering for the king, if he had been a witness of it from a corner of the room. De Saint-Aignan, in his character of ambassador, felt greatly offended at it, as his master himself would have been, and returned to announce to the king what he had seen and heard. It is there that we now find him, in a state of great agitation, in the presence of the king, still more agitated than he.

"But," said the king to the courtier, when the latter had finished his report, "what did she decide to do? Shall I, at least, see her presently before supper? Will she come to me, or shall I be obliged to go to her room?"

"I believe, Sire, that if your Majesty wishes to see her, you will not only have to take the first step in advance, but will have to go the whole way."

"Nothing for me! Does that Bragelonne still possess her heart?" muttered the king between his teeth.

"Oh, Sire, that is not possible; for it is you alone whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière loves, and that, too, with all her heart. But you know that De Bragelonne belongs to that proud race who play the part of Roman heroes."

The king smiled feebly; he knew how true the illustration was, for Athos had just left him.

"As for Mademoiselle de la Vallière," De Saint-Aignan continued, "she was brought up under the care of the Dowager Madame; that is to say, in austere retirement. This engaged young couple coldly exchanged their little vows in the presence of the moon and the stars; and now, when they find they have to break those vows, it plays the very deuce with them."

De Saint-Aignan thought he should have made the king laugh; but on the contrary, from a mere smile Louis passed to the greatest seriousness of manner. He already began to experience that remorse which the count had promised D'Artagnan he would inflict upon him. He reflected that, in fact, these young persons had loved and sworn fidelity to each other; that one of the two had kept his word, and that the other was too conscientious not to feel her perjury most bitterly; and with remorse, jealousy sharply pricked the king's heart. He did not say another word; and instead of going to pay a visit to his mother or the queen or Madame, in order to amuse himself a little and make the ladies laugh, as he himself used to say, he threw himself into the huge arm-chair in which his august father, Louis XIII., had passed so many weary days and years in company with Baradas and Cinq-Mars.

De Saint-Aignan perceived that the king was not to

be amused at that moment; he tried a last resource, and pronounced Louise's name, which made the king look up immediately. "What does your Majesty intend to do this evening? Shall Mademoiselle de la Vallière be informed of your intention to see her?"

"It seems she is already aware of that," replied the king. "No, no, Saint-Aignan," he continued, after a moment's pause; "we will both of us pass our time in dreaming. When Mademoiselle de la Vallière shall have sufficiently regretted what she now regrets, she will deign, perhaps, to give us some news of herself."

"Ah, Sire, is it possible you can so misunderstand that devoted heart?"

The king rose, flushed with vexation; he was a prey to jealousy in its turn. De Saint-Aignan was just beginning to feel that his position was becoming awkward, when the curtain before the door was raised. The king turned hastily round. His first idea was that a letter from Louise had arrived; but instead of a letter of love, he saw only his captain of Musketeers standing upright and silent in the doorway. "M. d'Artagnan!" he said. "Ah! well, Monsieur?"

D'Artagnan looked at De Saint-Aignan; Louis's eyes took the same direction as those of his captain. These looks would have been clear to any one, and they were especially so to De Saint-Aignan. The courtier bowed and quitted the room, leaving the king and D'Artagnan alone.

"Is it done?" inquired the king.

"Yes, Sire," replied the captain of the Musketeers, in a grave voice, "it is done!"

The king was unable to say another word. Pride, however, obliged him not to pause there. Whenever a sovereign has adopted a decisive course, even though it be

unjust, he is compelled to prove to all witnesses, and particularly to himself, that he was quite right in so adopting it. A good means for effecting that — an almost infallible means, indeed — is to try to prove his victim to be in the wrong. Louis, brought up by Mazarin and Anne of Austria, knew better than any one else his vocation as a monarch; he therefore endeavored to prove it on the present occasion. After a few moments' pause, which he had employed in making silently to himself the same reflections which we have just expressed aloud, he said in an indifferent tone, "What did the count say?"

"Nothing at all, Sire."

"Surely he did not allow himself to be arrested without saying something?"

"He said he expected to be arrested, Sire."

The king raised his head haughtily. "I presume," he said, "that M. le Comte de la Fère has not continued to play his obstinate and rebellious part?"

"In the first place, Sire, what do you term rebellious?" quietly asked the musketeer. "Is that man a rebel, in the eyes of the king, who not only allows himself to be shut up in the Bastille, but who even opposes those who do not wish to take him there?"

"Who do not wish to take him there!" exclaimed the king. "What do you say, Captain? Are you mad?"

"I believe not, Sire."

"You speak of persons who did not wish to arrest M. de la Fère?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And who are they?"

"Those whom your Majesty intrusted with that duty, apparently."

"But it is you whom I intrusted with it," exclaimed the king.

"Yes, Sire; it is I."

"And you say that, despite my orders, you had the intention of not arresting the man who had insulted me!"

"Yes, Sire, that was really my intention. I even proposed to the count to mount a horse that I had had prepared for him at the Barrière de la Conférence."

"And what was your object in getting this horse ready?"

"Why, Sire, in order that M. le Comte de la Fère might be able to reach Havre, and from that place make his escape to England."

"You betrayed me then, Monsieur?" cried the king, kindling with a wild pride.

"Exactly so."

There was nothing to say in answer to statements made in such a tone; the king was astounded at such an obstinate and open resistance on the part of D'Artagnan. "At least you had a reason, M. d'Artagnan, for acting as you did?" said the king, proudly.

"I have always a reason, Sire."

"Your reason cannot be your friendship for the count, at all events, — the only one that can be of any avail, the only one that could possibly excuse you, — for I placed you entirely at your ease in that respect."

"Me, Sire?"

"Did I not give you the choice to arrest or not to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère?"

"Yes, Sire; but — "

"But what?" exclaimed the king, impatiently.

"But you warned me, Sire, that if I did not arrest him, your captain of the Guards should do so."

"Was I not considerate enough towards you when I did not compel you to obey me?"

"To me, Sire, you were, but not to my friend; for my

friend would be arrested all the same, whether by myself or by the captain of the Guards."

"And this is your devotion, Monsieur, — a devotion which argues and reasons! You are no soldier, Monsieur!"

"I wait for your Majesty to tell me what I am."

"Well, then, — you are a Frondeur."

"And since there is no longer any Fronde, Sire, in that case —"

"But if what you say is true —"

"What I say is always true, Sire."

"What have you come to say to me, Monsieur?"

"I have come to say to your Majesty: Sire, M. de la Fère is in the Bastille."

"That is not your fault, it would seem."

"That is true, Sire. But, at all events, he is there; and since he is there, it is important that your Majesty should know it."

"Ah, M. d'Artagnan, so you set your king at defiance!"

"Sire —"

"M. d'Artagnan, I warn you that you are abusing my patience."

"On the contrary, Sire."

"What do you mean by 'on the contrary'?"

"I have come to get myself arrested too."

"To get yourself arrested, — you!"

"Of course. My friend will be lonely down there; and I have come to propose to your Majesty to permit me to bear him company. If your Majesty will but give the word, I will arrest myself; I shall not need the captain of the Guards for that, I assure you."

The king darted towards the table and seized a pen to write the order for D'Artagnan's imprisonment. "Pay attention, Monsieur, that this is forever!" cried the king, in a tone of stern menace.

"I can quite believe that," returned the musketeer; "for when you have once done such an act as that, you will never be able to look me in the face again."

The king dashed down his pen violently. "Leave the room, Monsieur!" he said.

"Oh, not so, Sire, if it please your Majesty!"

"How, not so?"

"Sire, I came to speak temperately to your Majesty. Your Majesty got into a passion with me: that is a misfortune; but I shall not the less on that account say what I had to say to you."

"Your resignation, Monsieur, — your resignation!" cried the king.

"Sire, you know whether I care about my resignation or not, since at Blois, on the day when you refused King Charles the million which my friend the Comte de la Fère gave him, I tendered my resignation to your Majesty."

"Very well, then, do it at once!"

"No, Sire; for there is no question of my resignation at the present moment. Your Majesty took up your pen just now to send me to the Bastille, — why should you change your intention?"

"D'Artagnan! Gascon that you are! who is the king, allow me to ask, — you or myself?"

"You, Sire, unfortunately."

"What do you mean by 'unfortunately'?"

"Yes, Sire; for if it were I —"

"If it were you, you would approve of M. d'Artagnan's rebellious conduct, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"Really?" said the king, shrugging his shoulders.

"And I should tell my captain of the Musketeers," continued D'Artagnan, — "I should tell him, looking at him all the while with human eyes and not with eyes like coals

of fire, 'M. d'Artagnan, I have forgotten that I am king; I have descended from my throne to insult a gentleman.'"

"Monsieur!" cried the king, "do you think you can excuse your friend by exceeding him in insolence?"

"Oh, Sire! I shall go much further than he did," said D'Artagnan; "and it will be your own fault. I shall tell you what he, a man full of delicacy, did not tell you; I shall say: 'Sire, you sacrificed his son, and he defended his son; you sacrificed him; he addressed you in the name of honor, of religion, of virtue, — you repulsed, pursued, imprisoned him.' I shall be harder than he was, for I shall say to you: 'Sire, choose! Do you wish to have friends or lackeys, soldiers or slaves, great men or puppets? Do you wish men to serve you or to crouch before you? Do you wish men to love you or to fear you? If you prefer baseness, intrigue, cowardice, — oh! say it, Sire! We will leave you, — we who are the only surviving illustrations, nay, I will say more, the only models of the valor of former times; we who have done our duty, and have exceeded, perhaps, in courage and in merit the men already great for posterity. Choose, Sire, and without delay! Whatever remains to you of the grand nobility, guard it with a jealous eye; of courtiers you will always have enough. Delay not — and send me to the Bastille with my friend; for if you have not known how to listen to the Comte de la Fère, that is to say, to the most sweet and noble voice of honor; if you do not know how to listen to D'Artagnan, that is to say, to the most candid and rough voice of sincerity, — you are a bad king, and to-morrow will be a poor king. Now, bad kings are hated; poor kings are driven away.' That is what I had to say to you, Sire; you are wrong to have driven me to it."

The king threw himself back in his chair, cold and

livid. Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet, he could not have been more astonished; he appeared as if his respiration had ceased, and as if he were at the point of death. That rough voice of sincerity, as D'Artagnan had called it, had pierced through his heart like a sword-blade.

D'Artagnan had said all that he had to say. Comprehending the king's anger, he drew his sword, and approaching Louis XIV. respectfully, placed it on the table. But the king, with a furious gesture, thrust aside the sword, which fell on the ground and rolled to D'Artagnan's feet. Notwithstanding his mastery over himself, D'Artagnan too, in his turn, became pale and trembled with indignation. "A king," he said, "may disgrace a soldier, — he may exile him, and may even condemn him to death; but were he a hundred times a king, he has no right to insult him by casting dishonor on his sword! Sire, a king of France has never repulsed with contempt the sword of a man such as I am! Stained with disgrace as this sword now is, it has henceforth no other sheath than either your heart or my own. I choose my own, Sire; give thanks for it to God, and my patience." Then snatching up his sword, he cried, "My blood be upon your head!" and with a rapid gesture he placed the hilt upon the floor and directed the point of the blade towards his breast. The king, however, with a movement still more rapid than that of D'Artagnan, threw his right arm round the musketeer's neck, and with his left hand seized hold of the blade by the middle, and returned it silently to the scabbard. D'Artagnan, upright, pale, and still trembling, suffered the king to do all, without aiding him, to the very end. Then Louis, overcome, returned to the table, took a pen, wrote a few lines, signed them, and offered the paper to D'Artagnan.

"What is this paper, Sire?" inquired the captain.

"An order for M. d'Artagnan to set the Comte de la Fère at liberty immediately."

D'Artagnan seized the king's hand and kissed it; he then folded the order, placed it in his belt, and quitted the room. Neither the king nor the captain spoke a word.

"Oh, human heart, director of kings!" murmured Louis, when alone; "when shall I learn to read in your recesses, as in the leaves of a book? No, I am not a bad king, nor am I a poor king; but I am still a child."

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